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SEPTEMBER
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"Is that a glass of urine?"

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This page: Zachary Berger, August Cole, Marco Vittur

EMPIRE
WELCOME

"WHEN A FIRE starts to burn/There's a lesson you must learn," sang Homer Simpson once. "Something something, then you'll see/You'll avoid catastrophe!" He may not have managed to remember all the lyrics, but he got the gist of it right: fire is dangerous, handle with care. Something the heroes of *Avatar: Fire And Ash*, our cover story this month, seem destined to learn the hard way. They're up against the Ash People, led by the formidable Varang (pictured right in concept-art form) — will they avoid catastrophe?

We'll find out this Christmas what something something unfolds on Pandora. Until then, this issue provides the closest thing you can get to sitting by James Cameron's side as he tweaks his latest colossal blockbuster to his satisfaction. We asked if we could spend a couple of days in New Zealand following him around. Incredibly, he said yes (with one proviso: "We'll have to send out a swarm of hit drones if you don't abide by our embargo rules"; we chose to believe he was serious). Go on the journey yourself from page 46.

It's not the only unbelievable bit of access this month. We gathered the three members of legendary rock band Spinal Tap — David St. Hubbins (fire), Nigel Tufnel (ice) and Derek Smalls (lukewarm water) — plus the man who has now made two documentaries about them, Marty DiBergi, for what can only be described as a joyfully shambolic conversation. Our interviewer Alex Godfrey was lucky enough not to be squashed by a tiny Stonehenge, or die in a bizarre gardening

accident, but he did get called a "muckraker" by Tap. Justified? Read from page 64 to make your own mind up.

Elsewhere, we sit down with rising star David Jonsson, preview *Frankenstein*, *The Running Man* and *The Toxic Avenger*, and recount the sorry, spinach-laden saga of Robert Altman's *Popeye*. As the kids might say, this issue's fire.

Thanks for reading.

Nick

NICK DE SEMLYEN
EDITOR
@nickdesemlyen

SUBSCRIBER COVER

This month's exclusive subscriber cover by Dylan Cole
Award-winning concept artist Cole has created stunning visuals for many movies, including *Avatar: Fire And Ash*. Visit dylancolestudio.com to see more of his amazing work.

TURN TO PAGE 30 TO LEARN HOW TO SIGN UP FOR AN EMPIRE SUBSCRIPTION*

* Please note that your first issue may not be the cover displayed

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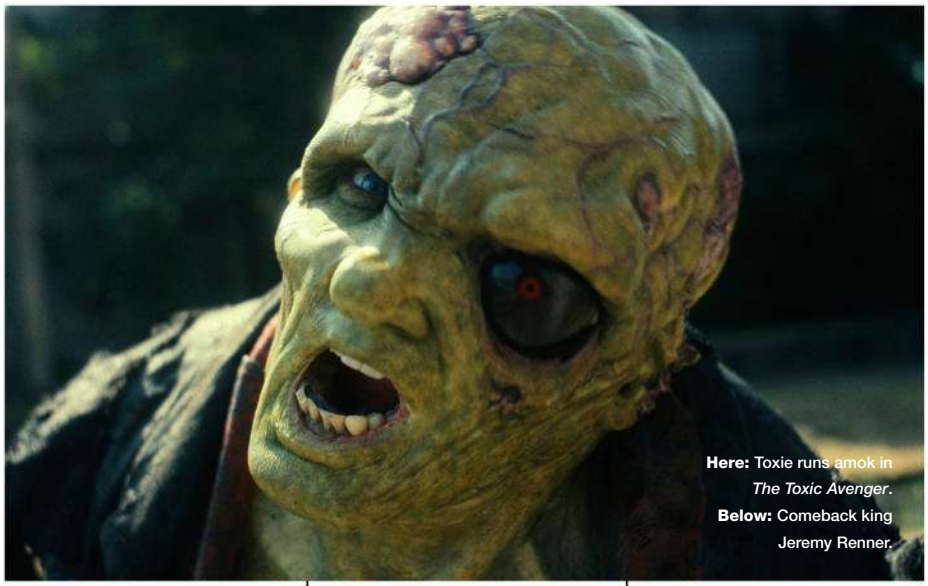

Here: Toxie runs amok in *The Toxic Avenger*. **Below:** Comeback king Jeremy Renner.

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DISPATCHES

TEAM EMPIRE ON A FEW OF OUR HIGH POINTS THIS MONTH

NICK DE SEMLYEN MET JAMES CAMERON IN NEW ZEALAND

"Last summer I visited the James Cameron exhibition at the Cinémathèque in Paris. Little did I know that in a year I'd get to spend two days with the man himself. I came away more impressed than ever by his one-of-a-kind mind and formidable work ethic."

CHRIS HEWITT CAUGHT UP WITH JEREMY RENNER

"Former footballer Iain Dowie once coined a word: 'bouncebackability'. Jeremy Renner is that in human form. The man was nearly crushed to death by a snowplough, but when I met him in London recently, he was the picture of health. Long may his bouncebackability continue."

SYLVAIN HOMO PHOTOGRAPHED DAVID JONSSON

"Working on set with David was a wonderful experience. We shot in an old factory-turned-studio in North London and worked with textured surfaces to give the shoot an 'industrial and raw' look. David's professionalism and energy made the shoot special and unique."

© 20th Century Studios. Spinelines issue 443: Newsstand: "Hey, wanna sneak into Tron?" is from *Ralph Breaks The Internet*. Subs: "Lose the grid or you lose your job" *is from Die Hard*

JOAQUIN PHOENIX

PEDRO PASCAL

LUKE GRIMES

DEIRDRE O'CONNELL

MICHEAL WARD

WITH AUSTIN BUTLER

AND EMMA STONE

★★★★

"BRILLIANT"

THE INDEPENDENT

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EMPIRE COMMENT

LETTER OF THE MONTH

IN MEMORY OF A LONG-TIME READER

I'm writing to pay tribute to my best friend, Neil Johns, who sadly passed away. For over 40 years, Neil and I shared a weekly tradition of watching films together, and every single issue of *Empire* magazine has been a part of that journey. Neil was an avid amateur critic with razor-sharp insight, a brilliant blues guitarist, and the best friend anyone could hope for. I can't begin to imagine going to the cinema without him. It would mean the world to me if Neil could be mentioned in the magazine he loved so deeply.

MARK ROBINSON, VIA EMAIL

Very sorry for your loss, Mark. We're very grateful that Empire *played a part in your friendship. Have a Picturehouse membership on us, for many more films to come in Neil's memory.*

Picturehouse *Empire*'s star letter wins a Picturehouse Membership, valid for one year at all Picturehouse Cinemas across the UK, including the flagship Picturehouse Central in London's West End. The Membership comes pre-loaded with five free tickets, and gets you access to exclusive discounts on food, snacks and drinks. When you write to us, please include your full contact details so we can arrange delivery of your prize.

ON *EMPIRE*'S BEST OF THE YEAR LIST: *Sinners* is indeed the best film of the year so far. That music scene, wow!!!!

STEF AGSTERIBBE

BRINGING HOME THE BACON

Flicking through your July issue and seeing a pig's snout staring back at me ['High On The Hog', issue #442] may have been the best surprise I've ever had reading your magazine. I have long been derided by friends, family and colleagues when saying *Babe* is one of the greatest films of all time. So simple but magical. That'll do, pig.

RYAN BAKER, VIA EMAIL

Thanks, Ryan! We are the true home of Babe *fans. Just call us Babestation. Wait, that sounds wrong.*

Just back from hols and catching up with @empiremagazine.bsky.social's new issue. Loving Priscilla Page's piece on *Point Blank*. Masterpiece of a movie.

@RICHLEIGHTON.BSKY.SOCIAL

THE PATH OF THE RIGHTEOUS MAN

Does the closing scene in *Mission: Impossible — The Final Reckoning* now answer the mystery of what is in the briefcase in *Pulp Fiction* and reveal that Luther was Marsellus Wallace all along?

CHRIS HAYWOOD, SHEFFIELD

A fun shared-universe theory, Chris! In fact, the question of what was in that briefcase has long been settled by Tarantino: it was a 60-watt light bulb and a battery.

THE BIG QUESTION

THIS MONTH WE ASKED:
AFTER *F1*, WHICH SPORT WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE COVERED ON FILM?

Chess-boxing is the only answer.
@HUGHESMI.BSKY.SOCIAL

The world needs more films about cricket.
@SWAC.BSKY.SOCIAL

A Will Ferrell movie about curling is only a matter of time, surely?
@BUCKEEJIT.BSKY.SOCIAL

Clog-fighting. Cheese-rolling. Brockian Ultra-Cricket.
@TALLANTYRE.BSKY.SOCIAL

Tiddlywinks seems like the perfect Wes Anderson venture.
@JOHNTHEWALRUS.BSKY.SOCIAL

Darts. Magic arrows, from pubs to arenas!
@ADRIANOGAZZA.BSKY.SOCIAL

WATCH OUT FOR THE NEXT QUESTION VIA OUR BLUESKY ACCOUNT: @EMPIREMAGAZINE.BSKY.SOCIAL

PREVIOUSLY, IN EMPIRE...

THE CLASSIC SCENE JULY 1989

The Classic Scene page has been with *Empire* since the very beginning. Starting with Marlon Brando's famous "I coulda been a contender..." speech from *On The Waterfront*, nearly every issue has highlighted a legendary cinematic moment, with scenes from *Apocalypse Now* to *Zombieland*. We even compiled 101 of the best into a one-off magazine special.

In 2016, as part of a redesign, we changed things up: the scenes are now chosen by famous folk, which has led to some interesting choices: Luca Guadagnino chose a scene from 1932's *Freaks* ("Gobble gobble! One of us!"), while Barry Jenkins chose a nearly wordless scene from *Silent Light*. Mark Wahlberg remains the only person to choose a scene he was in — but as it was one we had already featured (the Alfred Molina sequence from *Boogie Nights*), it did not run.

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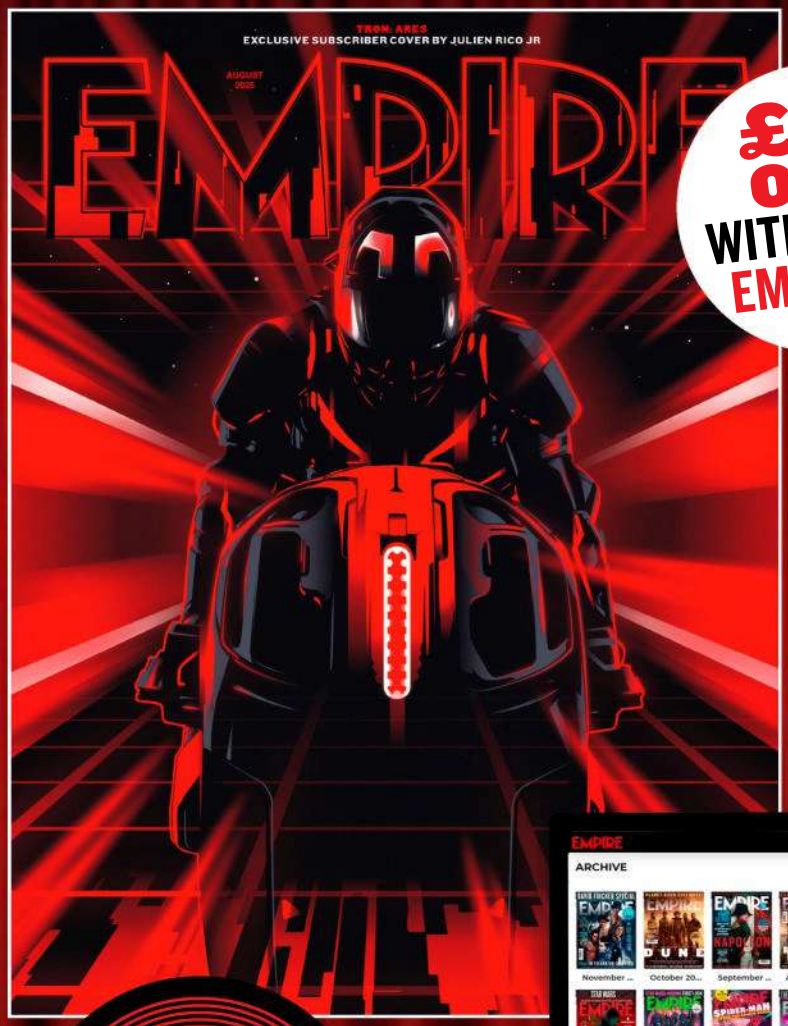

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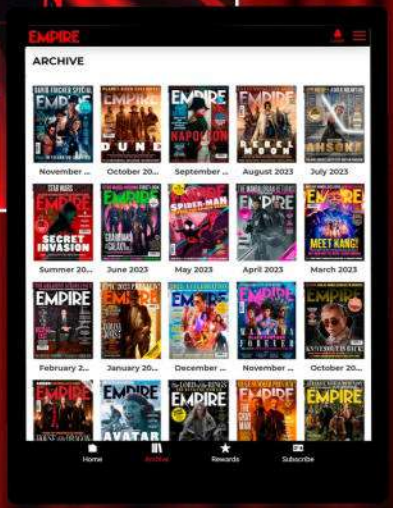

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first word

ALL THE ESSENTIAL INTEL, FROM HOLLYWOOD AND BEYOND

SEPTEMBER 2025 | EDITED BY **BETH WEBB**

Glen Powell steps up

HOW THE RUNNING MAN IS TAKING ITS STAR INTO THE NEXT PHASE OF HIS MASTER PLAN

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

GLEN POWELL HAS been running for as long as he can remember. Running towards acting, running towards Hollywood success, and now running towards *The Running Man*, his first major solo star vehicle. Adapted from the 1982 Richard Bachman/Stephen King novel by director Edgar Wright, the film stars Powell as Ben Richards, a desperate man who enters a deadly game show in the hopes of winning enough money to help his ailing daughter. It's the kind of big blockbuster leading role that has been a lifetime-in-the-making for Powell. "My first project ever was on Steven Spielberg when I was in second or third grade," he tells *Empire*, adding that he got to tell this to Spielberg himself while making *Twisters*. "That shows you how much I loved this shit since I was a kid."

The 36-year-old Texan has been putting in the hard yards for years, progressing slowly but surely from brief turns in the likes of *The Dark Knight Rises* to hooking up with Richard Linklater on *Everybody Wants Some!!*, and then, of course, *Top Gun: Maverick*. His audition for that impressed Tom Cruise so much that they created the role of the arrogant aviator Hangman just for him, and he damn near well flew off with the entire film. "It was the greatest film school of my life," he says. "It definitely changed my life. [But] I would say that it didn't change immediately. There was still a lot of work to do."

That work has manifested into a series of well-judged career choices. There was the sleeper hit in which he co-starred with Sydney Sweeney, *Anyone But You*, that with its $220 million box-office haul proved that romcoms were still a viable prospect. There was *Hit Man*, the sexy thriller he co-wrote with Linklater, which showed that he had range to go with the rugged. There was the aforementioned *Twisters*, where he made a distinct impression despite not being a swirling CG tornado. When he speaks to *Empire*, he's just finished a day on his next movie, a mysterious, untitled summer 2026 blockbuster under the auspices of J.J. Abrams. "Just feeding the machine, man," says Powell. "The one we're making with J.J. right now is really incredible."

Powell is a man who's meticulous about his choices — even if that means saying no, as he did to *Jurassic World Rebirth*. "Sometimes you've got to close your eyes and put yourself in that movie, and you're like, 'No, I would not be good in this movie,'" he explains. "'There's somebody better that's gonna breathe more life into this, or can do a better job than I can.' And you just have to be realistic about that. Sometimes you put yourself out of a job, but that's okay."

But he could see himself in the lead role in *The Running Man*. Precisely because of what it isn't, namely a remake of the 1987 Schwarzenegger movie in which Arnie played the contestant on the most violent game show this side of *Jeopardy!*. Instead, Wright's movie is a mostly faithful adaptation of that film's source material, so he wasn't looking for a musclebound meathead to play his Ben Richards. Which suited Powell down to the ground. "I just don't identify with people with

Clockwise from main: Wanted man: Ben Richards (Glen Powell) hones his running on a treadmill; Director Edgar Wright and Michael Cera on set; Richards hides in plain sight.

superpowers for the most part," he says. "I like the ordinary guy against extraordinary odds. The entire world is hunting this man, trying to kill him. Can he survive? Can he save his family? That's a great, simple story."

Powell has a remarkable clarity of thought about his career. He knows his strengths, and his weaknesses, and how audiences perceive him. "Edgar told me an audience was not preconditioned to knowing that I was going to make it on the other side," he says. "There was a fresh entry-point into the movie. I do feel like an ordinary guy."

Albeit one who does more running than the next ordinary guy. "Most actors do not know how to run on camera," laughs Powell. Luckily, he knows a man who does: Tom Cruise. So he called him for advice on how to look good while racing along on his getaway sticks. After all, nobody wants to look like Phoebe from *Friends* while they're sprinting. "It's not like Tom was FaceTiming me on the treadmill, or anything like that," adds Powell. "But there are basic instructions that he would give, just to make sure it looks powerful and propulsive, and that you're actually fast." Oh, he'll be fast alright, as he hurtles inexorably towards superstardom. Just don't get in his way.

***THE RUNNING MAN* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 7 NOVEMBER**

The auteur about to shake (and stir) up 007

TEAM *EMPIRE* GIVE THEIR TWO CENTS ON DENIS VILLENEUVE DRIVING JAMES BOND INTO A NEW ERA

James Dyer (Digital Editor-In-Chief): This is incredible news for so many reasons. Denis Villeneuve takes IPs and makes them feel fresh. He brings a very independent sensibility to his big-budget filmmaking. This is the Bond I want to see. Hundred per cent.

Ben Travis (Deputy Online Editor): Of all the names rumoured to be involved with this film, Villeneuve was not the one who I thought would actually do it. I thought someone like Edward Berger, who made *Conclave*, would be more likely, or Jonathan Nolan, as he has an Amazon connection with his TV show *Fallout*. Villeneuve felt like wishful thinking because he's doing *Dune 3* and has other projects lined up, but maybe when you're offered Bond you drop everything except the sand worms?

John Nugent (Reviews Editor): *Dune* is filming this year, right? That means that Bond won't start shooting until at least 2026. But he's been speaking in interviews about wanting to do Bond for years. He's a Bond nut.

Ben: The thing that makes me feel slightly tired about it is that once again they're going for a big, serious, statement director. It doesn't feel like a massive change of energy from Sam Mendes or Cary Fukunaga.

Harry Stainer (Social Media Editor): Villeneuve's films are also known to be quite cold, aren't they?

Ben: Do you know who else is cold? James Bond.

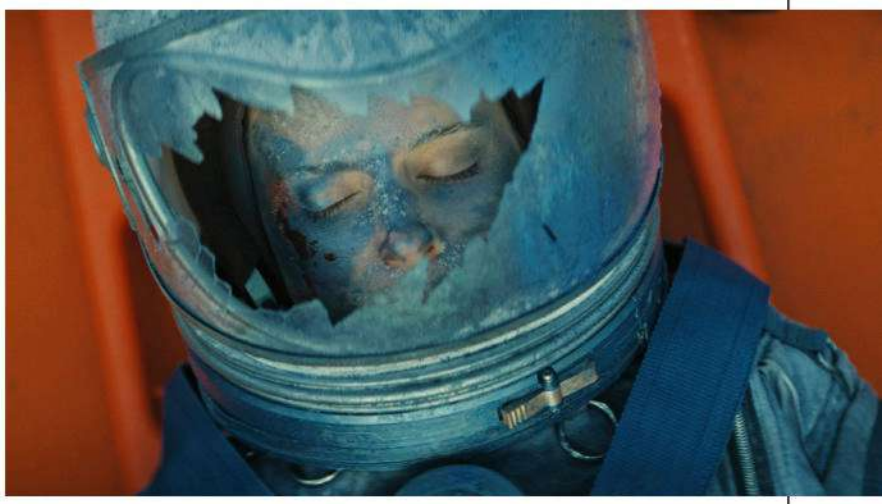
Harry: I saw Paul King's name being thrown around and thought we might be getting a more fun take on the franchise.

John (*adopts Jim Broadbent in* Paddington *voice*): "Oh hello! It's a little Bond!"

Top to bottom: Denis Villeneuve; Roger Moore's Bond clowning about in *Octopussy* — a direction Villeneuve is unlikely to take; Sean Connery as 007 in *Dr. No*.

Alex Godfrey (Features Editor): He's such a Bond fan, though, that I think he will appreciate and respect that. I don't buy into him just making a big, cold Bond film.
Chris Hewitt (Executive Editor): I think the second that we hear Denis Villeneuve is going to direct a Bond film, we can all see in our minds what this film is going to be: it's going to look incredible, it's going to sound incredible, it's going to have wonderful performances in it. But I'm a huge Bond fan, and I feel that if you take the humour out of Bond, as increasingly happened in the Craig era, it just becomes a little bit bland.
John: It probably won't be like the more camp Roger Moore films. I'd be surprised if we see Bond dressing up like a clown like in *Octopussy*.
James: But he does love Sean Connery's Bond, he loves Roger Moore's Bond. These are his touchstones. So I don't know that we're necessarily going to get another Craig era in that regard.
John: I'm really excited. To paraphrase Alan Partridge: "Stop getting Bond *right*!" (*Bangs table*)
Alex: Does that work?
John: *Start* getting Bond right!
Chris: John, stop getting "Stop getting Bond wrong" wrong.
John: To go back to what Ben was saying about big serious directors, I feel like Villeneuve would have never been hired under Barbara Broccoli.
Liz Moody (Production Editor): What about when they hired Danny Boyle, though? That's someone with a distinct vision.
John: That collaboration didn't quite pan out though. I think in that era they had to get journeyman directors. I think this is the most singular auteur director that they've ever had.
James: He treats every film, no matter what the budget, as if it's a $2 million passion project. He's hands-on with every aspect of it. He wants bagpipes, he puts fucking bagpipes in it.
Ben: It's a statement of intent from Amazon as well. There was a lot of outrage when MGM got wrapped up in the company that plays adverts in the middle of their movie streams. With Villeneuve this is them saying, "Hey, we are not making a disposable Bond. We are doing it properly and getting a proper filmmaker."
John: Yeah, it's worth remembering that this is not just Amazon — this film will be bringing that MGM prestige.
Harry: Hopefully it means Villeneuve will bring in some of his regular collaborators as well. It would be great if Greig Fraser came in as cinematographer.
Liz: Does this mean that someone is likely to be cast as Bond soon? And does it change who the new Bond will be?
Alex: It's an interesting question, because there might be actors who weren't previously interested in playing Bond, but who really want to star in a Denis Villeneuve film.
Ben: The only direction they can really go in is to cast Shai-Hulud.
Chris: The name's Hulud. Shai-Hulud.

Marco Vittur, Bernard Walsh



FROM OUTER SPACE TO INNER TURMOIL

HOW THE ASTRONAUT PUSHES ONE NASA ROCKETEER TO PSYCHOLOGICAL EXTREMES

WHAT DOES A space traveller experience *after* they return from a mission? That's the central question of Jess Varley's debut feature *The Astronaut*. Kate Mara stars as Sam, stationed at a remote government facility to recuperate after a turbulent space mission — until she begins to suspect that she might not be alone. The idea first came to Varley after she came across an article that detailed the physical toll of space travel: fevers, tinnitus and hallucinations of objects floating, as if still suspended in zero gravity. Sam attempts to conceal her side effects from NASA to avoid being taken off her next mission, but there's only so much you can do to hide visions of flying pens and eggs. "Meanwhile, our [crew] are off-camera with fishing wire," Varley says, laughing.

Last November, *Empire* joined Team *Astronaut* on a chilly day in Ireland, where an airy house overlooking Dublin is subbing in for a Virginia NASA compound. Mara is filming an early scene in which she's nursing Sam's post-mission injuries in the sparse, cold house. It's quite a pivot from the last time she played an astronaut — aboard the Ares III in Ridley Scott's *The Martian* — but she's been fascinated with researching the very real psychological effects of space travel. "I could pick and choose different things that are based in reality," she explains.

As Sam's symptoms worsen, the film ventures further into body-horror territory. "Most of us grew up on Spielberg," Varley explains, and notes *Black Swan* and M. Night Shyamalan as other major inspirations. "And I love the idea of having genre provide challenges for everyday people." For Laurence Fishburne, who plays Sam's liaison and adopted father, the fluidity between genres was the appeal: "It's part psychological thriller, it's part haunted-house movie, it's part science-fiction."

Yet relatability has still been important for Varley when it comes to Sam's tumultuous journey. She's even spoken with Dr Elizabeth Warren, the head of the rehabilitation division at NASA about the "very human realities" of recovery. "The very first thing that astronauts want when they get back from space is a cheeseburger, so we put that in there." One post-space mission meltdown with a side of fries, please. **IANA MURRAY**

Top to bottom: Astronaut Sam Walker (Kate Mara) feels chilled; Director Jess Varley (centre) on set; Walker with her family.

***THE ASTRONAUT* IS OUT ON DIGITAL ON 22 SEPTEMBER**

On A Role

MATT SMITH IS RUSS

THE ACTOR PLAYS A PUNK CRIMINAL IN DARREN ARONOFSKY'S CAPER, *CAUGHT STEALING*

WORDS **BETH WEBB**

THE ATTITUDE

Smith was given room for interpretation with Russ, an English rocker caught up in a '90s New York criminal underworld. "Darren gave me a really liberating note which was, 'I give you permission to be a punk every day,'" he tells *Empire*. So he began sending Aronofsky the work of Salford poet John Cooper Clarke, including the relentlessly insulting *Twat* ("You put the 'shat' in 'shatter', you put the 'pain' in 'Spain'"). "I [reckoned that Russ had] moved to New York and learned all of these John Cooper Clarke poems because he's a punk, but he's quite a sensitive punk," Smith explains. It's in the city that his character befriends neighbour Hank (Austin Butler). After accidentally dragging Hank into his shady dealings, Russ no doubt becomes worthy of those Cooper Clarke takedowns.

Top to bottom: Russ (Matt Smith) and Hank (Austin Butler); "You rrs hole!"; Performance poet John Cooper Clarke; Punks hang out in London's Wardour Street in the 1980s.

THE HAIR

When it came to adopting his character's gravity-defying mohawk, Smith needed some convincing, especially as it was his own hair being shaved and spiked. "It's one thing having a skinhead, it's another to shave your head to the bone," he laughs, after promising that he has "the funniest" video of the process. Smith originally wanted the hair to be pink, but a more era-specific fiery red and yellow was eventually decided upon. The impact of the transformation was instant, especially while filming in the heart of New York. "If we were in the Lower East Side, it was guaranteed that dogs would fucking bark at me," he remembers. As for lying down between takes, he could forget about it.

THE DETAILS

Smith trawled the internet while preparing for the role, studying the evolution of outfits and identities within the punk movement across the '70s, '80s and '90s via archive footage. For his final look, he and costume designer Amy Westcott then visited vintage stores across New York. He fondly describes a grey overcoat that the costume department graffitied with phrases like "up yours" across it. "I actually wanted to keep it, but I left in such a rush," he confesses. That level of detail populated all of Russ' world, with Smith even helping to choose what went into his character's car, a speedy rustheap with an "RSS HOLE" registration plate.

THE MUSIC

When he wasn't being accosted by neighbourhood hounds, the actor took inspiration from off-duty walks around New York while listening to decidedly softer songs. "I used to say that Russ is a fucking mad punk; he goes home and listens to classic punk tunes and loses his mind," Smith summarises, "but there's also a day where he goes home and puts on Whitney Houston. He's one of those guys who's a bit of everything." Even punks just wanna dance with somebody.

***CAUGHT STEALING* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 29 AUGUST**

Getty Images, Niko Tavernise

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT M3GAN

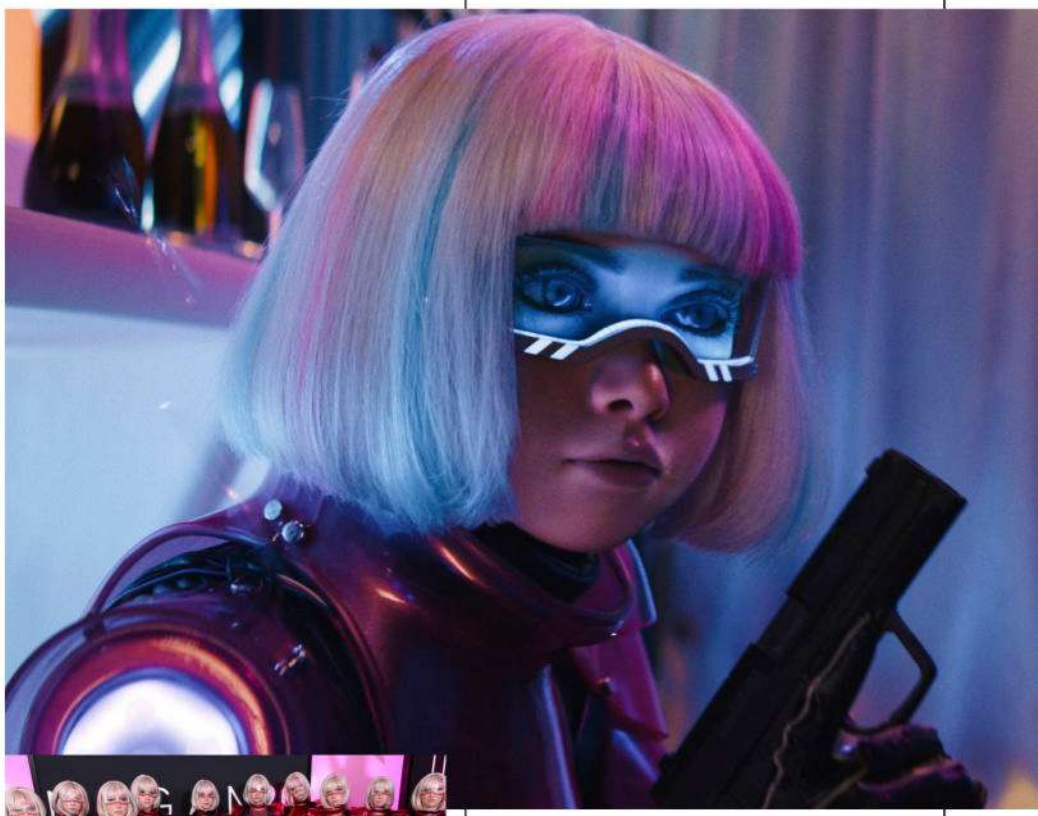
IS THERE A FUTURE FOR THE KILLER DOLL, AFTER HER SASSY SEQUEL BECAME A SHOCK SUMMER FLOP?

"WE GOT TOO excited by M3GAN, and she didn't work." It sounds like something roboticist Gemma (played by Allison Williams) might have uttered in the first *M3GAN* movie, after her fast-tracked prototype robot malfunctioned and started killing people. In fact, the above quote was delivered by the movie's producer Jason Blum in a recent interview, as he faced up to the sequel's less-than-killer box-office showing.

The 2023 original — about an AI doll with a taste for killer dance moves and brutal murder — was a surprise hit, netting $180 million against a $12 million budget, and sparking countless internet memes. But *M3GAN 2.0*, released in June this year, has taken just $33 million and had nowhere near the same social-media-melting impact. So, what went wrong?

"We thought M3GAN was like Superman — we could do anything to her," Blum explained on podcast *The Town*. "We could change genres, make her look different, turn her from 'bad guy' to 'good guy'. We overthought how powerful people's engagement was with her."

The sequel is indeed *very* different to the original — an action/comedy rather than a sci-fi/horror, in which M3GAN switches from villain to hero — when perhaps fans wanted more of the same. The release date may also be a factor: the first movie came out in blockbuster-light January, but Blum shifted *M3GAN 2.0* to summer, squaring up against behemoths like *F1* and *Jurassic World Rebirth*.



Top to bottom: Robot rebooted; Valley of the dolls: James Wan and Jason Blum at the *M3GAN 2.0* premiere.

"We went from a little horror movie to a tentpole," Blum laughed. "We've gone too far over our skis."

There's also the fact that, in the two years between *M3GAN*s 1 and 2, AI has gone from dystopian fantasy to divisive, potentially-job-threatening reality. Audiences may be less keen to engage with robot dolls when fears over artificial intelligence are at an all-time high. That said, Blum also stated he and *M3GAN* co-producer James Wan are "going to come back swinging", while executive producer Adam Hendricks recently told Instagram, "We'll go horror on the [third] one. There's already a plan..." Plus, there's spin-off movie *SOULM8TE* due in 2026, which looks to push the *M3GAN*-verse into even wilder territory, being an "erotic thriller" about a widower who buys an adult AI doll. If that conjures similar buzz to the original, 'M3GAN 3.0' would seem an inevitability.

Don't expect the diminutive diva to power down just yet. **TOM ELLEN**

TECH-BRO BIOPICS POWER UP

HOLLYWOOD IS TAKING ON SILICON VALLEY WITH THREE UPCOMING PROJECTS

ARTIFICIAL

Luca Guadagnino's Andrew Garfield-fronted comedy-drama will reportedly focus on OpenAI during the tumultuous time when CEO Sam Altman was fired and rehired within a few days. How Guadagnino's usual smouldering sensibility will fit in with this technical-sounding story remains to be seen — could we be in for some extremely arousing em-dash usage?

THE ALTRUISTS

This Netflix limited series will spotlight the scandalous crypto company FTX, led by CEO Sam Bankman-Fried (Anthony Boyle). Despite his positive philosophical outlook, Bankman-Fried was arrested in 2022 for the theft of at least $8 billion in customer funds through FTX and sentenced to 25 years in federal prison for it. Quite the downfall.

THE SOCIAL NETWORK PART II

Fifteen years after his Oscar-winning drama, Aaron Sorkin returns to the Metaverse for a follow-up to *The Social Network*. Sorkin is set to write and direct the film, based on Jeff Horwitz's *The Facebook Files*. No word on whether Jesse Eisenberg will reprise his role as Mark Zuckerberg yet, or whether there'll be a new Zuck-wit in town. **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

Toy-store story

DEREK CIANFRANCE ON WHY HE HAD TO MAKE BIZARRE TRUE-CRIME MOVIE ROOFMAN

WORDS **AL HORNER**

"THIS COULD *NOT* have really happened." That's what Derek Cianfrance kept thinking as he was making *Roofman*, his first film in nine years. Based on real events, it follows army vet-turned-outlaw Jeffrey Manchester (Channing Tatum), who robbed at least 40 branches of McDonald's between 1998 and 2000. "Then he got put in prison. Then broke out of prison. Then he hid out in a Toys R Us," Cianfrance explains. He tells *Empire* about what drew him to what he describes as his "*Mrs. Doubtfire* on the run".

AN ECCENTRIC CRIMINAL

Remember the iconic sequence in *Mission: Impossible,* where Ethan Hunt rappels into a vault? Replace CIA headquarters with those of Ronald McDonald and you've pretty much got Manchester's method for his Hamburglar-style break-ins. Despite his many sophisticated robberies, Cianfrance insists Manchester is no scary criminal mastermind. "He's this very sweet eternal optimist," the director says, having spoken to him on the phone "three to four times a week" for four years while constructing the film, from the maximum-security jail where Manchester is serving a 40-year sentence. "He's known a lot of struggle in his life, but has this ability to just keep tap-dancing through his darkest moments."

A BIG HEART

During his phone calls with Manchester — as well as friends and then-girlfriend Leigh, played in the film by Kirsten Dunst — Cianfrance realised there was heartbreak to this story, making *Roofman* more than a zany true-crime romp. "He wanted more than anything to fit back into society and have a family," says the director. After leaving the 82nd Airborne Division of the US Army, though, Manchester found it hard "to hold down a regular job. He just couldn't blend in".

A LAIR WITH A TWIST

After breaking out of prison by climbing underneath a truck and clinging onto its undercarriage, Manchester lived for six months in a Toys R Us store in Charlotte, North Carolina, by creating a secret hideout behind a display of bicycles. "2004 America was a very different America," Cianfrance says of recreating the

Clockwise from main: Toys R Him: Channing Tatum as Jeffrey Manchester; Director Derek Cianfrance in 'McDonald's'; Peter Dinklage; Tatum with Kirsten Dunst as girlfriend Leigh.

store's time-accurate, Tamagotchi-filled interior. Toys R Us went out of business in 2008 but the building still exists in Charlotte, meaning "we were able to shoot where this all actually took place," says the director, whose own experience of working in stores like it made him determined to recreate it authentically. "I know that world of suburban America," he says. "My upbringing was [spent in] big box stores and I worked at Walmart for a long time."

A DASH OF COMEDY

There was an "element of arrested development" to Manchester in his fugitive days, Cianfrance says, nodding to how the criminal, as shown in *Roofman*, "really did play with the toys in the Toys R Us at night to entertain himself". The film leans into that child-like eccentricity for comedy, but not all of these instances made the final cut. Like when midway through his crime-spree, Manchester went to a police station in a bunny outfit asking for a pair of scissors. "He wanted to cut pockets in his girlfriend's daughter's Halloween costume, because her hands were cold," grins Cianfrance. "He lived in this heightened reality like that." Not all heroes wear capes, but the occasional few sport cotton-tails.

***ROOFMAN* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 10 OCTOBER**

Davi Russo, Marco Vittur

THE PLATFORM

"The most baffling character posters are likely to lead to bemusement, confusion or outright hostility"

JOHN NUGENT ON THE MOVIE MARKETING CAMPAIGNS THAT GO TOO FAR

IF YOU WERE on the fence about James Gunn's new *Superman* movie, would a poster of a CG dog swing you? That, presumably, is the hope of the film's marketing team, which produced 16 character posters highlighting its ensemble cast, with separate ones for every supporting role. Superman (David Corenswet) and Lex Luthor (Nicholas Hoult) get their own, obviously — but so does Superman's dog, Krypto; Clark Kent's colleague Steve Lombard (Beck Bennett), whose main superpower seems to be 'Ability To Grow A Large Moustache'; and Alan Tudyk's 'Superman Robot #4'. So, has movie marketing gone too far?

Character posters are a strange quirk of the cinematic ecosystem. They have a historic precursor in the 'personality posters' from the Golden Age of Hollywood, when studios promoted their stars above the films they were in. But individual in-character posters first became a phenomenon in the 1990s, with the rise of multiplexes, which led to more wall space. For giant blockbusters with enormous ensemble casts, that has also given marketing teams the opportunity to properly leverage their bankable star power.

In movies like an *Avengers* or a *Justice League*, where the sheer volume of A-listers can barely be squeezed into a single frame, character posters make some sense. But for other films, one wonders what the marketeers' motivations are for spotlighting its minor stars. Take *Indiana Jones And The Dial Of Destiny*, which gave Toby Jones' hapless minor character Basil his own poster, despite only appearing in the opening sequence. Or *Mission: Impossible: The Final Reckoning*, which gave a poster to William Donloe's Inuit wife Tapeesa (Lucy Tulugarjuk), who does some very nice throat-singing but doesn't sit in the franchise's inner circle.

Stranger still are the non-humans given an entire one-sheet. Krypto we can allow, as he is a major part of the narrative. But what of the giraffe used for *The Hangover Part III*? Or the goats in *Thor: Love And Thunder*? Even fictional animals are exploited, as seen in the egregious poster for *Fantastic Beasts: The Secrets Of Dumbledore*, which advertised a $200 million film with a 60-inch-by-40-inch Niffler.

Pity the poor graphic designers who have to make marketing lemonade out of cinematic lemons. A good poster should champion a film, intrigue a potential viewer and get the word out; the most baffling character posters, meanwhile, are far more likely to lead to bemusement, confusion, or outright hostility. Still, expect the *Superman* one-sheet for 'Steve Lombard' and his defiantly non-superpowered 'tache to become a collector's item in the kitsch shops of the world, one day soon.

It's alive!

GUILLERMO DEL TORO SHARES A FIRST LOOK AT HIS LONG-AWAITED LABOUR OF LOVE, FRANKENSTEIN

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

GUILLERMO DEL TORO has been influenced by *Frankenstein* pretty much all his life. "You can see it in *Hellboy*, you can see it in *Blade II*," he tells *Empire*. "You can see it most any chance I get." But he'd never actually adapted Mary Shelley's classic novel. Until — you guessed it — now. Here, he dissects our world-exclusive snapshot of Frankenstein and his Creature as their journey begins.

1. CREATING A CRUCIAL MOMENT

Virtually every director who's ever franked a stein, whether it's James Whale or even Sir Kenneth Branagh, knows that they must include this key scene, where Victor Frankenstein (Oscar Isaac) breathes life into his life's work, a creature made of parts of multiple corpses. Del Toro is no different. But his approach very much is. "There is a thing that most *Frankenstein* movies don't capture," he says. "The anxiety. 'Will it work?', 'I gotta get it done quick', 'I'm trying something new.'" He was also keen to avoid certain clichés associated with the creation, from thunderstorms to the use of angular shadows. "I said [to Isaac], 'This is what he's been looking for the whole movie. Let's make it like a concert, like Leonard Bernstein directing an orchestra, or Rick Wakeman with five synthesisers, playing them at the same time. I want to have that joy."

2. MASTERING A MAKER

"Ultimately, Victor is the anti-hero," says del Toro of Isaac's scientist, a genius whose determination to do battle with death tips over into madness and leaves a trail of devastation in his wake. "He is a guy that is so obsessed with his goals. He reminds me a little bit of the tech bros who want to create *something*, but the consequences are not very well thought out." Del Toro's vision of Victor continues his musical metaphor. "Victor is like a rock star in the medical community, but an unruly one," he

Top: The laboratory in all its glory. **Above:** Frankenstein in full flow.

says. "So we tried to make him look dashing and Byronian. We flared the pants, we gave him a little bit of a heel on the boots. But he doesn't do a full Jagger. He doesn't know the Chicken Dance!"

3. CASTING THE CREATURE

Andrew Garfield had agreed to play the Creature, but dropped out a couple of months before filming began due to a scheduling conflict. So del Toro turned to Jacob Elordi. "I am as elated with that collaboration as I have ever been in my life, with anyone," says the director. "He is a remarkable physical actor. Remarkable." Of course, this image would appear to capture one of Elordi's easier days, what with him literally lying down on the job. Though "easier" is something of a misnomer. "The full-body make-up took about six hours or more, and then you have the shooting day on top of that," del Toro adds. "So if you're resting on a table, it's not a terrible day."

4. SHAKING UP MAKE-UP

The Creature's face is being obscured by a drainage mask that del Toro based on dentist models from the 1800s. "This is the preamble to the big reveal," he says. But what we can see of the Creature suggests that del Toro, along with his make-up guru Mike Hill, is forging a different path from those who have gone before him. No green skin here. No bolts in the neck. "Mike is an expert on the original Jack Pierce make-up," explains del Toro. "We tried to, quite candidly, avoid any of that. I showed Mike an image of a statue of a flayed saint in alabaster." The vivid lines on the Creature's flesh also suggest that Victor has carefully pieced him together from an array of corpses. No rough scarring or stitching here. The Creature's look will change through the movie. "In order for a monster's make-up not to get stale during a movie, you have to change it," reveals del Toro. "This is stage zero." Stages one and beyond will see him nod to classic designs by the illustrator Bernie Wrightson, with long hair and a "doomed beauty".

5. BUILDING A GOTHIC WORLD

Frankenstein saw del Toro and his crew travel all over the UK and Canada for location work, but he shot this sequence on a soundstage in Toronto. "We wanted this to be a movie the way they quote-unquote used to make movies," he says. "Huge, massive, elaborate sets." His production designer, Tamara Deverell, was essentially given licence to go to town. "Every prop you see in this picture was sculpted and created for the film," he adds. Including the Y-shaped table on which the Creature lies. "The table is one of the most beautiful pieces of set design." Hope it was comfortable, for the sake of Elordi's back.

***FRANKENSTEIN* IS ON NETFLIX IN NOVEMBER**

Church out, chips in

CONCLAVE'S EDWARD BERGER TRADES PAPAL POWER-PLAY FOR GAMBLING SAGA BALLAD OF A SMALL PLAYER

WORDS **TOM ELLEN**

"FOR GUYS LIKE me, Las Vegas washes away your sins," said Robert De Niro's Sam 'Ace' Rothstein in *Casino*. And it turns out Ace was not alone in seeing unlikely parallels between the church and the international gambling mecca.

"The casino is like our new church," laughs Swiss-Austrian director Edward Berger. "It's the epitome of capitalism. But it's an 'opposite' church — a spiritually empty place that leaves you devoid of hope. Perhaps that's what drew me to this story — I was flocking from one church to another."

The story in question is *Ballad Of A Small Player* — a "fun, colourful, operatic explosion" (Berger's words) set in the mega-casinos of Macau, China. The film arrives a year after Berger's acclaimed papal drama *Conclave*, which enjoyed a lengthy spell in the pop-culture limelight due partly to the real-life papal conclave back in May ("do you think the cardinals watched conclave together and were pointing at the screen going 'that one's you'" pondered one viral *X* post).

"We hit a zeitgeist note, which is satisfying because you never know if a movie will resonate," Berger says, of *Conclave*'s meme-tastic social-media afterlife. "On the surface, [*Conclave*] and [*Ballad*] are very different," the director adds. "But there's a common thread of people looking for peace. In *Conclave*, Ralph [Fiennes] finds it in overcoming his inner doubt. In *Ballad*, Colin [Farrell] finds it in compassion."

Farrell's character — 'Lord' Doyle — is an embezzler posing as an aristocrat (hence the quote marks around 'Lord'), gambling away his stolen money at Macau's baccarat tables. Adapted from Lawrence Osborne's 2014 novel, the movie is — Berger tells us — "an explosion of the senses, like Macau itself, but it goes to a dark place of the soul, too. It's an addiction tale". Much of the delicate tonal balance relies on Farrell's performance. "Colin has this incredible warmth and likeability," says Berger.

Top to bottom: Lord Doyle (Colin Farrell) hopes to hit the jackpot; Filming on location; Director Edward Berger.

"Doyle does heinous things, but we still need to like him. Colin can take the audience by the hand and make us like [a character], even in awful moments."

Hot on Doyle's heels is Tilda Swinton's Cynthia — an investigator tasked with recovering the cod-Lord's pilfered cash. "They're kindred spirits, though," explains Berger. "She's hunting him, but she's also fascinated by him. There's a quiet love story there."

Shooting took place on location in Macau because, as Berger says, the city is "part of the movie's fabric — that contrast between the air-conditioned, windowless nightmare of the casinos, and the rain, sweatiness and tropicality of the nature outside. My opinion, like the movie's opinion, is that the casino leaves you empty," the director adds. "There's this carelessness about money: it becomes apparent how *sad* [capitalism] is. In the end, once the casinos have lost their purpose, nature will reclaim them."

Nobody tell Ace Rothstein.

***BALLAD OF A SMALL PLAYER* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 17 OCTOBER AND ON NETFLIX FROM 29 OCTOBER**

Akimoto Chan, Isabelle Cocozza – Culture Film Publication

THE GRINDHOUSE VENUE ROCKING LONDON

HOW LONDON'S THE NICKEL CINEMA IS BRINGING OLD-SCHOOL THRILLS TO MODERN AUDIENCES

Clockwise from main: A peek inside The Nickel; An outside view; Some of the film delights on offer.

IT BEGAN WITH a trailer which announced that "Cinema is not dead". This two-minute supercut of lurid trash-cinema clips heralded The Nickel: a "small capacity DIY cinema space dedicated to psychotronic film, from the arthouse to the grindhouse to the unclassifiable... Shocking, savage, subversive, strange and underseen".

Except, when the trailer was made — by filmmaker Dominic Hicks, to kill time while waiting for a delayed flight from Heathrow — The Nickel didn't even exist. "But it kind of sat in my head, and I kept thinking about it," Hicks tells *Empire*. Eventually, reasoning there was room on London's streets for a "rep movie theatre" like New York's Spectacle or LA's New Beverly, the self-described "borderline insane cinephile" crowdfunded the startup funds to make his vividly imagined ideal picture house a 37-capacity, trash-serving reality on Farringdon's Clerkenwell Road.

Hicks' fevered journey into cult cinema kicked off with *Reservoir Dogs* when he was 13 years old, and later "exploded" when he saw *Kill Bill*. He started collecting 16mm prints and VHS tapes, screening them at his local pub, then The Cinema Museum in Kennington. Now he has his very own venue to host such carefully curated events as the recent 'Bad Acid Double Feature' (which pairs 1971's *I Drink Your Blood* with 1977's *Blue Sunshine*), complete with filmmaker interviews and vintage adverts and animations. But what does a grindhouse crowd look like in the UK of 2025?

"It's a very broad spectrum," Hicks says. "There's a lot of young people in their twenties, and we get people coming in who are well into their seventies and eighties." What unites them is a desire to see "something different that they wouldn't have seen anywhere else", along with a rejection of the suspicious convenience of streaming. "Netflix and these services give you an illusion of diversity and choice. But actually there are huge dark passages of cinema that are being erased. As soon as streaming services choose not to host them because they may be problematic, or a bit too weird, they'll just be gone. But from the audiences we've been getting, it's clear people still like to sit in the darkness together and be shocked and made uncomfortable and amused by strange collective projections."

Hicks promises to "keep it weird" at The Nickel, even if it also screens classics like *The Third Man* and *White Heat* — "It's high and low art brushing shoulders," he says. Cinema's life, it seems, is in good hands here. **DAN JOLIN**

KILLING THE KISS

SUPERMAN ISN'T THE FIRST MOVIE TO HAVE ITS ON-SCREEN SMACKERS CENSORED ABROAD

SUPERMAN & LOIS

SUPERMAN (2025)

Two smooches from the colleagues-turned-couple — including their 33-second mid-air lip-lock — were cut in the Indian version of the superhero movie. The country's Central Board Of Film Certification (CBFC) deemed both "overly sensual". Kissing: the ultimate kryptonite.

LILY & RYLE

IT ENDS WITH US (2024)

Before they became embroiled in a legal battle, co-stars Blake Lively and Justin Baldoni came up against Qatar. The country's censorship committee banned the romantic drama entirely on account of its canoodling, meaning it technically ended before it even began.

ARTHUR CURRY & PRINCESS MERA

AQUAMAN (2018)

More DC depravity! Some Saudi Arabian and Indonesian fans reportedly didn't witness a 20-second underwater necking sesh between the loved-up Atlanteans after regulatory boards stepped in. Talk about making waves.

JAMES BOND & MADELEINE

SPECTRE (2015)

'From India With Love' it wasn't, as Daniel Craig's 007 snog-time was halved by the CBFC. The call was met with internal backlash, with one board-member labelling it "a mockery of the freedom of a filmmaker". Try with 'The Spy Who Hugged Me' next time. **BETH WEBB**

Hollywood shoots for the moon

HOW FILMMAKERS ARE USING BOUNDARY-PUSHING CAMERAS TO TRANSFORM CINEMA

WORDS **BETH WEBB**

WHO WOULD HAVE thought that a tech revolution would be hailed by a fully nude zombie, lurching through the wilderness? *28 Years Later* is not the first film to be shot with iPhones — see also Steven Soderbergh's *Unsane* and *High Flying Bird* — but it's certainly the biggest in scale. "You can record at 4K 60 frames a second on your phone. Don't, because your iCloud storage will go through the roof," Boyle tells *Empire*. "But for a cinema screen, it works."

28 Years Later is just one recent example of people pushing the frontiers of filmmaking in order to bring startling visuals to the screen. In the case of Boyle, he used the pocket-sized devices for their lightness, allowing them to venture into the authentically unkempt Northumbrian wilderness. "But it also allowed us to mobilise the actors. So some of the shots are done with the actors carrying the phone in their hand," he explains while referencing a spectacular shot of Aaron Taylor-Johnson running full pelt towards the end of the film. He and cinematographer Anthony Dod Mantle also created a rig with a half-moon crescent of iPhones, to niftily capture what Boyle laughingly calls "a poor man's *Bullet Time*".

While Boyle went for smaller and more compact, others are going bigger. Much, much bigger. The IMAX format has never been more prevalent in filmmaking, thanks to titans like Christopher Nolan, Ryan Coogler and Denis Villeneuve. "It's the biggest, highest-quality canvas in the world, and the opportunity to paint on that canvas in novel ways is a great allure for particularly auteur filmmakers," says IMAX CEO Richard Gelfond. A recent turning-point was *Oppenheimer*, which captured IMAX black-and-white film photography for the first time. And with *The Odyssey*, Nolan and cinematographer Hoyte van Hoytema are set to break new barriers by making it the first film ever to be shot *entirely* with IMAX cameras.

Team Nolan aren't the only ones experimenting with bold new technology. For some scenes in Coogler's *Sinners* involving Michael B. Jordan's twin characters Smoke and Stack, a 'Halo' rig — a ring formation of up to

THE PIPELINE

EIGHT PROJECTS IN DEVELOPMENT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT

WORDS **JORDAN KING**

THE EYES ARE THE BEST PART

Past Lives' **Greta Lee** is heading behind the camera to write and direct an adaptation of Monika Kim's bestselling psychological horror novel. Set in LA, the story centres around a female Korean-American serial killer with a tendency to eat — you guessed it! — human eyes. Yum!

HOUSE OF GAMES

David Mamet's 1987 neo-noir is getting retooled at Amazon. **Yahya Abdul-Mateen II** and Viola Davis are entering the fray as co-leads and co-producers to update Mamet's story, which sees a psychiatrist dangerously drawn into the gambling underworld.

SATURATION POINT

Cynthia Erivo is set to swap the Emerald City for the sweltering jungle in a Michael Bay-produced adaptation of Adrian Tchaikovsky's sci-fi climate thriller. The action follows a scientist (Erivo) as she leads a search-and-rescue mission into an inhospitably hot danger zone.

12 cameras attached to a brace — was created in order to capture the actor's performance from the neck up. This was then digitally transplanted onto a stunt double. This folded into the revolutionary remit of Autumn Durald Arkapaw, who became the first female DP to shoot a movie on IMAX film. Before shooting she consulted van Hoytema, who advised her of the camera, "Drive it like you stole it." This helped embolden her to use it in a variety of ways, from atop cranes to handheld shots. "Going forward, I want to work on projects that continue to challenge convention," she tells *Empire*. "Ryan's decision to tell this story in a larger format was one of the best creative choices we made."

Clockwise from main: *28 Years Later*; *Sinners* cinematographer Autumn Durald Arkapaw with director Ryan Coogler; *Sinners*' 'Halo' rig; Christopher Nolan making *Oppenheimer*; IMAX cameras were fixed to cars for *F1*.

While Durald Arkapaw was driving metaphorically, *F1* was literally putting IMAX cameras on cars. "The cameras are trying to capture certain sections of the track and make it look realistic, whether we're at Silverstone or Budapest," the film's star, Damson Idris, explained ahead of the film's release. "So you have to have the car in a perfect position so the camera is able to catch that. You also have to say your lines at the specific place on the track. You also have to try and not die. Those are the challenges." They paid off, as Gelfond can confirm: "If you can turn the cameras in real-time while you're going down the track — a few people have said to me after watching it that they felt a little disorientated, but in a good way. Because you're *in* the car and you're bumping around."

So what's next? While IMAX cameras recently started rolling on Denis Villeneuve's *Dune: Part Three*, Nolan has been working closely with the company to develop new features for *The Odyssey*. Gelfond is unable to disclose just what those features are, but recalls a phone call that he had with Nolan about a month ago. "He goes, 'Well, Rich, we know the camera will work in the most difficult conditions because I've dropped it off of high places. I've sent it under the ocean,'" laughs Gelfond. "And I'm thinking, 'It costs us $15 million to build these cameras, and Chris is dropping them off cranes...'" Despite his nerves, the IMAX CEO is excited about his continued collaboration with the filmmaker. "His fertile mind keeps pushing the envelope," he adds. And if they survive, those cameras will be passed along to other filmmakers to continue this innovative new means of bringing their vision to cinemas like never before. The sky, and the ocean, are the limit.

OCTOBER

Jeremy Saulnier is following up *Rebel Ridge* with an A24 joint starring *Mountainhead*'s **Cory Michael Smith**. Plot details on the movie — which Saulnier's directing from his own screenplay — are scarce, but reports indicate we're in for a tense, Halloween-set fugitive thriller. So, classic Saulnier, then.

THE THOMAS CROWN AFFAIR

Lily Gladstone, Kenneth Branagh and Danai Gurira join Taylor Russell for director-star Michael B. Jordan's heist-movie reimagining. Production on the remake — with Jordan in the billionaire art-thief role Steve McQueen made famous — is already underway in London.

THE STAND

Doug Liman is looking to do what George A. Romero and Paul Greengrass could not and finally bring Stephen King's 1,152-page opus to the big screen. According to insiders, Liman has a specific, single-movie vision for King's never-more-timely apocalyptic epic in mind.

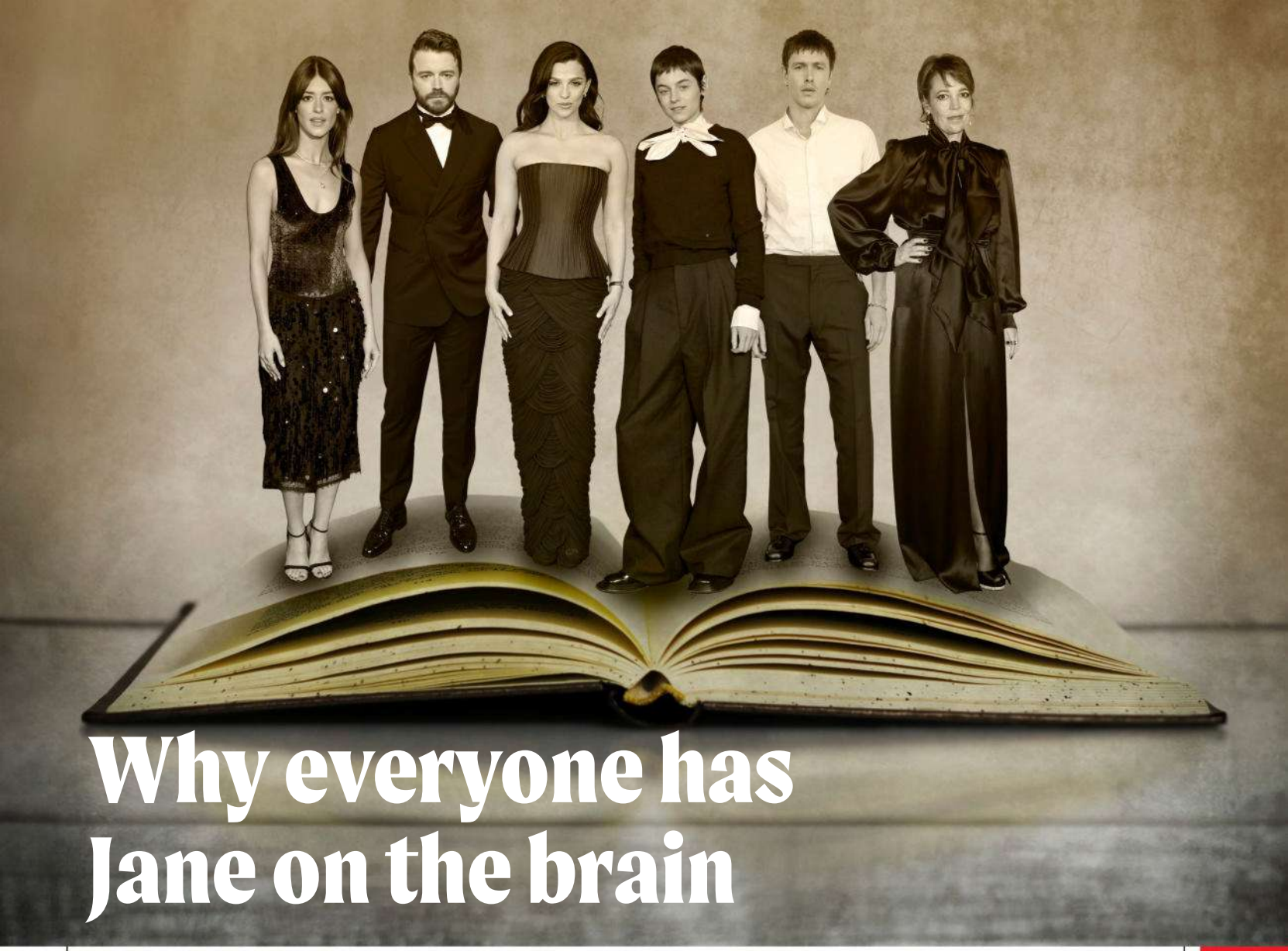
HIGHLANDER

There can be only one… **Marisa Abela** joining Chad Stahelski's long-gestating cult-fantasy reboot! The *Industry* breakout star will play an immortal swordplay teacher (and former flame of Henry Cavill's MacLeod). Shooting on this one — also co-starring Russell Crowe — starts in Scotland in September.

THE ROMANTIC

Dave Bautista is finally getting his romcom. The wrestler-turned-actor will lead *Josie And The Pussycats* duo Deborah Kaplan and Harry Elfont's latest, which follows Bautista's Ed, whose double-life — as bestselling romance novelist Francine London — threatens to come undone at a romance convention.

Eli Adé, Melinda Sue Gordon, Miya Mizuno, Getty Images, Warner Bros.



Why everyone has Jane on the brain

A NEW WAVE OF ADAPTATIONS PROVES THAT WE CAN'T GET ENOUGH OF ON-SCREEN AUSTEN

WORDS **BETH WEBB**

IN MAY, DEVONEY LOOSER found herself marvelling at the lively young crowd around her at a *Pride & Prejudice* movie anniversary ball in California. Since being gifted the book at 13 by her mother, the 58-year-old American scholar has dedicated much of her life to its author, from penning the upcoming book *Wild For Austen* to adopting the roller-derby alias 'Stone Cold Jane Austen'. But looking around at the attendees, she was taken aback by their response to the classical 19th-century music reminiscent of that used in the film. "[I was] like, 'Okay this has concert vibes, but the concert isn't Coachella — it's Chopin,'" she laughs.

Austen's work has led to many adaptations over the years, be it the *Pride And Prejudice* BBC series starring Colin Firth (which has been referenced in everything from *Bridget Jones's Diary* to *Barbie*) or *Clueless*. Yet a recent wave of newly announced projects confirm that audiences are as hungry as ever for Austen's prose. "I think people still come to Jane Austen and find her really funny," explains Jenny Bavidge, who teaches the course 'Jane Austen: Romance, Rebellion And Rewards' at the University Of Cambridge. "I think they respond to the struggles that [the heroines undergo] to understand themselves in their world."

Some of the current hype can be attributed to Austen's 250th birthday this year. An upcoming Audible series adaptation of *Pride & Prejudice*, starring Marisa Abela and Harris Dickinson, will launch in September as part of the celebration. But beyond 2025, fans can look forward to a new feature-length spin on *Sense And Sensibility* led by Daisy Edgar-Jones, and *another* TV series of *Pride And Prejudice* starring Olivia Colman, Emma Corrin and Jack Lowden. "The conversation that I'm seeing happening over in the States is about ginger Darcy," says Looser of Lowden's romantic lead.

Notably, studios are eschewing less conventional adaptations like *Clueless* in favour of more traditional ones. "From a commercial perspective, you could say that *Bridgerton*'s proved that there's an audience for this," says Looser of the Regency-era setting of Austen's novels. And there's still plenty more mileage in the author's body of work, like *The Watsons* — an unfinished text about young heroine Emma and her unruly family — that's being eyed by *Pride And Prejudice*'95 screenwriter Andrew Davies. "If someone of his stature and experience is turning to that, that's really interesting to me," says Looser.

Until then, she hopes that the new films and series will continue to stir the conversation among the young people she's seen responding so energetically to Austen's work. "Often students come to the courses that I teach having already seen some adaptation, and I love when they come in [ready] with a debate," she enthuses. "'My mom loves Colin Firth but I really love Matthew Macfadyen.' This generational shift over whose Darcy is whose drives their interest when [reading]the original text and finding ways that those films interpreted the character." Ginger Darcy has quite the mission on his hands.

Main: Daisy Edgar-Jones, Jack Lowden, Marisa Abela, Emma Corrin, Harris Dickinson and Olivia Colman. **Left:** Hint, hint.

THE KINGS OF COMEDY

THE STUDIO GUEST STARS MARTIN SCORSESE AND RON HOWARD SHAKE UP THE EMMYS WITH THEIR ACTING NODS

TWO OF THE most respected directors alive have for the first time in their careers been nominated by an awards body for, effectively, taking the piss out of themselves. Together, Martin Scorsese and Ron Howard are both acknowledged in this year's Best Guest Actor In A Comedy Series category at the Emmys — taking place on 14 September — for playing versions of themselves in *The Studio*, Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg's satirical take on the movie industry. They face off against three *other* performances from *The Studio* — Bryan Cranston as CEO Griffin Mill, and Dave Franco and Anthony Mackie as... themselves. Meanwhile, *The Bear*'s Jon Bernthal is the token nominee *not* repping *The Studio*.

Of course, Hollywood likes nothing better than shows about Hollywood, hence, perhaps, the 23 Emmy nominations for *The Studio* as a whole. But that's not to say Scorsese and Howard don't fully deserve this recognition. Scorsese, in particular, runs the emotional gamut, at first giddily excited about the prospect of getting $250 million for a Jonestown Massacre project, then utterly crushed when he realises he's just the fall guy for the studio's idiotic plan to make 'Kool-Aid: The Movie'. When 'Marty' starts welling up, it's an extraordinary moment. (Not that this is Scorsese's first rodeo: he also appears as himself in a classic *Curb Your Enthusiasm* cameo, getting angry with Larry David for ruining his movie.) As for Howard, he did start out as an actor in US sitcom *Happy Days*, but his turn in *The Studio* is something else, as we get to see this most mild-mannered of men explode in misguided fury when he's told that the last act of his latest film is a total bore. "You fucking suit piece of shit!" he yells at Rogen's movie exec, before throwing his cap at him in a blind rage.

Top to bottom: Sal Saperstein (Ike Barinholtz) and Matt Remick (Seth Rogen) feel the force of Martin Scorsese; Ron Howard makes his feelings known to Remick.

Whoever wins this fascinating battle of the comedy guest performances, the acclaim these two giants of cinema are now receiving can surely only encourage more such guest appearances in future series of *The Studio*. Will we see Spielberg losing his shit, Howard-style? Or David Fincher refusing to do more than one take? Maybe even an absurd storyline in which an iconic film director wins a major award for... taking the piss out of himself. **BOYD HILTON**

***THE STUDIO* IS ON APPLE TV+ NOW**

ON OUR MINDS

DAFT MUSINGS FROM THE STRANGE BRAINS OF TEAM *EMPIRE*

BILL McCONKEY

NICK DE SEMLYEN IS THINKING ABOUT... OVER-LITERAL TITLES

I liked *F1*, but isn't that like calling a movie 'Tennis'? The title of Cillian Murphy drama *Steve* is accurate but low-energy. And couldn't a Paul Greengrass thriller about a lost bus do better than… *The Lost Bus*? Come on, film people, step up your name-game!

BETH WEBB IS THINKING ABOUT... NICHE SCREEN CHEF BROS

Upon watching the trailer for *Springsteen: Deliver Me From Nowhere*, I realised that co-stars Jeremy Allen White and Stephen Graham have *both* starred in one-shot kitchen dramas (*The Bear* and *Boiling Point* respectively). Imagine the weirdly specific chats they could've shared.

ALEX GODFREY IS THINKING ABOUT... A DEMON GOAT-MAN

Feeding some goats on a farm with my daughter, my thoughts turned to Mr Tumnus. I pictured him there, a topless man with goat legs, flute in hand, standing among the livestock, and honestly... As a kid, I liked Mr Tumnus. But what a tortured, horrifying creation he is.

Getty Images, Marco Vittur

Moving on from Mare

SCREENWRITER BRAD INGELSBY CONTINUES HIS HOT STREAK WITH NEW CRIME SERIES TASK

WORDS **BETH WEBB**

A PRIEST AND a trash-collection guy walk into a bar. Okay, less of a bar and more the criminal underbelly of Philadelphia. And the priest is in fact a former priest-turned-FBI agent, who is hunting down the trash-collection guy. This is the premise of *Task*, the *Mare Of Easttown* follow-up from creator Brad Ingelsby. After the success of the Kate Winslet-fronted, Emmy-winning show, all eyes were on Ingelsby for a second season, but instead he pursued an idea that he had after talking with his local chief of police, who consulted on *Mare*. "He mentioned [how] trash men come through your neighbourhood, they know a lot about your life, and you don't seem to notice them at all," he tells *Empire*.

From that conversation he created Robbie (Tom Pelphrey), a single father who mines his unique local knowledge to carry out a series of home invasions. Mark Ruffalo's Tom is pulled back into the field, after a personal tragedy, to track him down. "The other side of the coin stemmed from my uncle, who was a priest and

Top to bottom: Taking the lead: FBI Agent Tom (Mark Ruffalo) with his Task Force; Show creator Brad Ingelsby with Ruffalo on set.

Peter Kramer/HBO

Top to bottom: Bin caught stealing: single dad Robbie (Tom Pelphrey) and pal Cliff (Raúl Castillo); Seeking answers.

left the priesthood, and being really interested in his experience, why he left, what his relationship is now like with God and how that's changed over the years," explains Ingelsby. He also learned that priests work closely with the FBI, especially during mass-casualty events, which fed into Tom's arc.

Ingelsby is the first to admit that he's a character writer. "The plot, to me, is not the easy part," he laughs. Yet it's his attention to detail when it comes to those characters that has made him a collaborator that Hollywood talent is lining up to work with. It's the reason Kate Winslet came aboard *Mare* as star and exec producer after reading the script for the first two episodes. The same happened with Ruffalo, who took the dual credit for *Task* after being sold on Ingelsby's writing.

Task comes during a busy year for the screenwriter. *Echo Valley*, a twisty thriller he had penned ten years ago that got stuck in development, finally launched in June with Julianne Moore and Sydney Sweeney in the starring roles. And later this year *The Lost Bus*, which he co-wrote with director Paul Greengrass, will hit screens. The film stars Matthew McConaughey as a bus driver trying to safely navigate schoolchildren through a deadly wildfire. The story, which was first published in *The Washington Post*, came to Ingelsby via producer Jason Blum, who thought it would be just up his street. "I've always been attracted to working-class people who get caught in exceptional situations. And that doesn't mean that they have to have superpowers," Ingelsby says. It turns out that Ruffalo doesn't have to grow big and green to be a hero. He just needs the right guy behind the script.

***TASK* IS ON SKY/NOW IN SEPTEMBER**

SLAY YOUR WAY TO THE TOP

HOW KPOP DEMON HUNTERS BECAME A MAJOR STREAMING SENSATION

A SOUTH KOREAN girl band who kill monsters while protecting humans with their music. It's a concept just wild enough to work, and work it has; within two weeks of launching on Netflix in June, *KPop Demon Hunters* had generated 33 million views while making its fictional band into real-world chart-toppers. Writer-director Maggie Kang and co-director Chris Appelhans share with *Empire* the secret sauce behind their breakout hit.

MYTHIC MUSES

For Korean-Canadian Kang, the idea came from a desire for representation, and interest in mythology. "I gravitated towards iconic images like the *Jeoseung Saja*, aka [Korean] Grim Reapers," she tells *Empire*. "I thought, 'That would make such a great villain.' It naturally led to demon hunters." That presented an opportunity to work in Kang's love of K-pop, the South Korean genre of music. "Demon hunters need this public-facing image because it's done in secret, and K-pop came to mind," she says. "It felt like a great mash-up."

CERTIFIED BANGERS

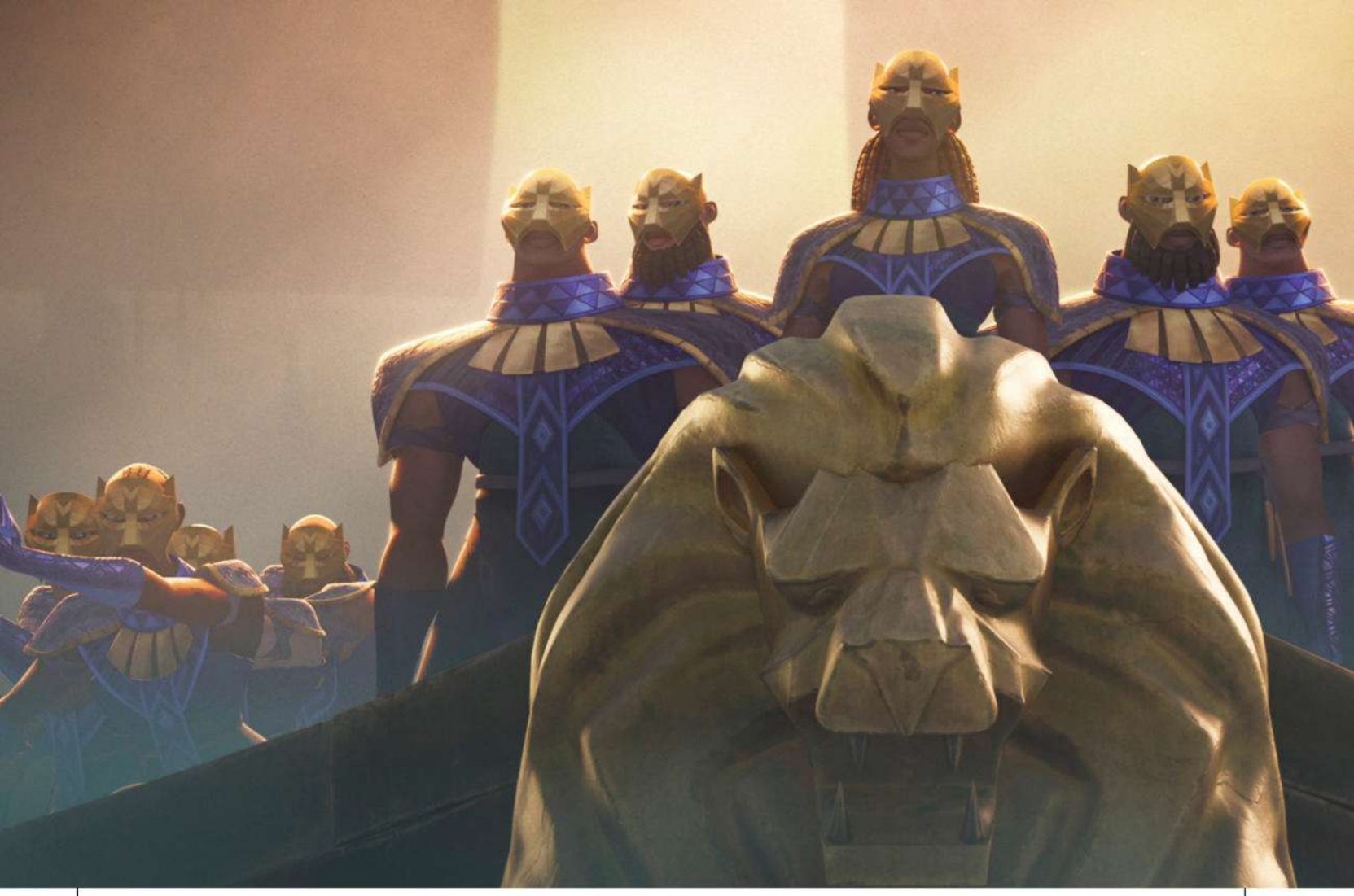
Through onstage musical performances, Kang wanted to use songs to contribute to story as well as spectacle, and draw in K-pop fans and newbies alike. "We worked hard to create music that emotionally serves our story," Kang says. "People may love the music and set the story aside, or you may end up loving the music more because you're invested in the story. It goes both ways, regardless of your entry-point." And it paid off: 'Golden', the band's single in the film, has been submitted for Oscar consideration after it topped multiple global streaming charts, in some cases surpassing actual K-pop bands.

Top to bottom: Mira (May Hong), Rumi (Arden Cho) and Zoey (Ji-Young Yoo); Yoo, Cho and Hong at work; Demon Hunters assembled.

AUTEUR INFLUENCES

The pair looked to a wide range of filmmakers for inspiration. Appelhans cites the work of Stephen Chow, and Wong Kar-wai's *In The Mood For Love*. Kang describes Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton's silent films as "formative" — and Bong Joon Ho tops both of their lists. "When we talked about his films, there was an instant shorthand; we were suddenly on the same page," says Appelhans. "We love the way he juggles different tones," Kang explains. "He's able to go from an intense dramatic or scary moment and splash some comedy in it, while still keeping the stakes high. We wanted to try that in animation." An ode to *Parasite* with pop songs? No wonder this movie is taking the world by storm. **LAURA SIRIKUL**

***KPOP DEMON HUNTERS* IS ON NETFLIX NOW**



Beyond Black Panther

EYES OF WAKANDA IS TAKING AN ICONIC KINGDOM INTO UNTAPPED TERRITORY

WORDS **AMON WARMANN**

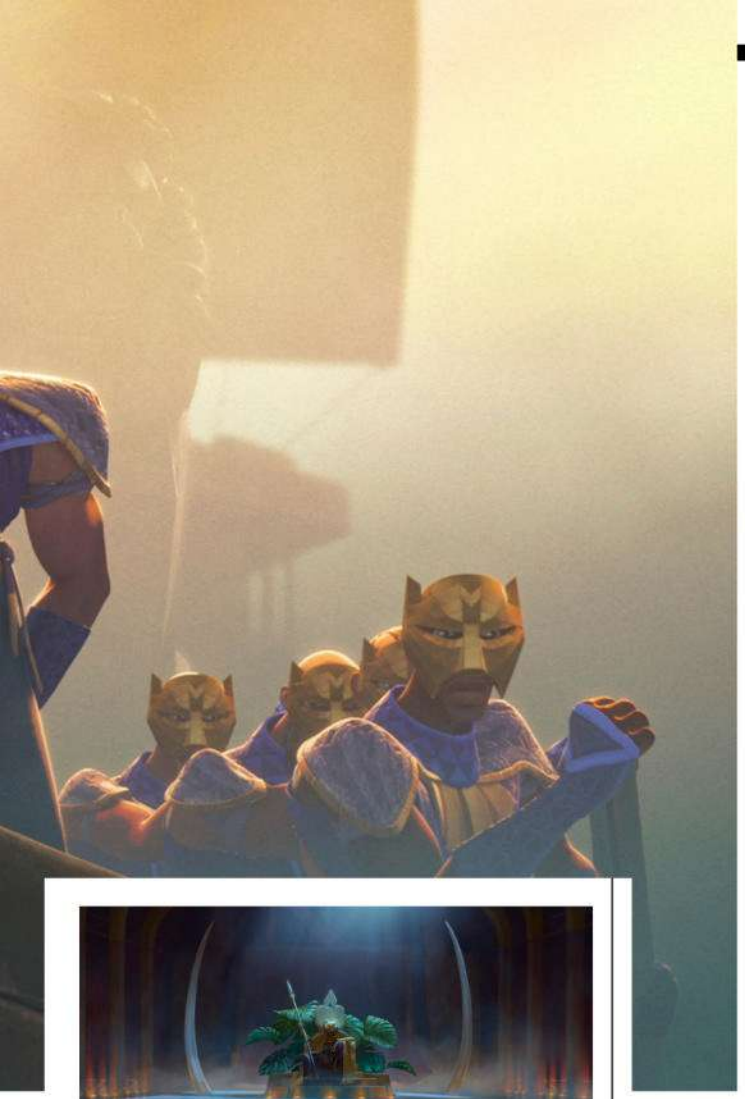
IT'S BEEN THREE years since the emotional second chapter of *Black Panther* hit screens with *Wakanda Forever*. While we await further word on Shuri and co.'s future, *Eyes Of Wakanda* — an animated, time-hopping, four-episode anthology — takes us deeper into the fictional African nation.

Until now, we've only seen the kingdom's inhabitants in modern-day Earth on MCU business. But in *Eyes Of Wakanda*, the Hatut Zeraze (their equivalent to the secret police) have the ability to time-travel, and use their skills to zip between different periods in pursuit of stolen vibranium. The series is also, in part, a spy show, with the events of the first episode setting off an espionage story through the ages. "[It's] about how Wakandans intersected through history — those futuristic, *Star Trek*-level Africans who bounce through time," explains creator and director Todd Harris.

One episode is set in Greece in 1260, and sees Noni (Winnie Harlow), a disgraced former soldier, face off against a crew of pirates in Crete while pursuing Wakandan general-turned-outlaw the Lion (Cress Williams). Harris — who worked as a storyboard artist on *Black Panther* and its sequel — collaborated on the series with Ryan Coogler, who serves as executive producer. It was Coogler who suggested incorporating the Sea People — a real-life, mysterious Bronze Age group of tribes — while they were developing the story. "They were raiders who robbed their way through the Mediterranean," Harris explains. "Which gave us an open [book] in terms of creating a world based on very vague but dramatic circumstances."

With the premise set, Harris got to work making his version of Wakanda look distinct from the iteration shown in previous animated Marvel series *What If...?*. He landed on a painterly feel, including a hand-drawn opening sequence. And he looked to African artists, citing classic African American illustrator Ernie Barnes — who did cover art for Marvin Gaye — and early 20th century illustrator and muralist Dean Cornwell as key influences. "They had

Right: The Lion (voiced by Cress Williams) takes the lead.



Top to bottom: Claws at the ready; The cat that got the cream; Noni (Winnie Harlow) and the Lion get acquainted.

a very distinct way of defining form with colour," he summarises.

Additionally, Harris worked with a broad team including Nigerian, Zulu and South African collaborators, who ensured that what we see in this series is as authentic as possible. "Theoretically, Wakanda is the most African place in [the continent], because they've been African consistently for 10,000 years. It's an unbroken culture," Harris says. "So [we had] to look at everything that's in contemporary Africa and imagine backwards."

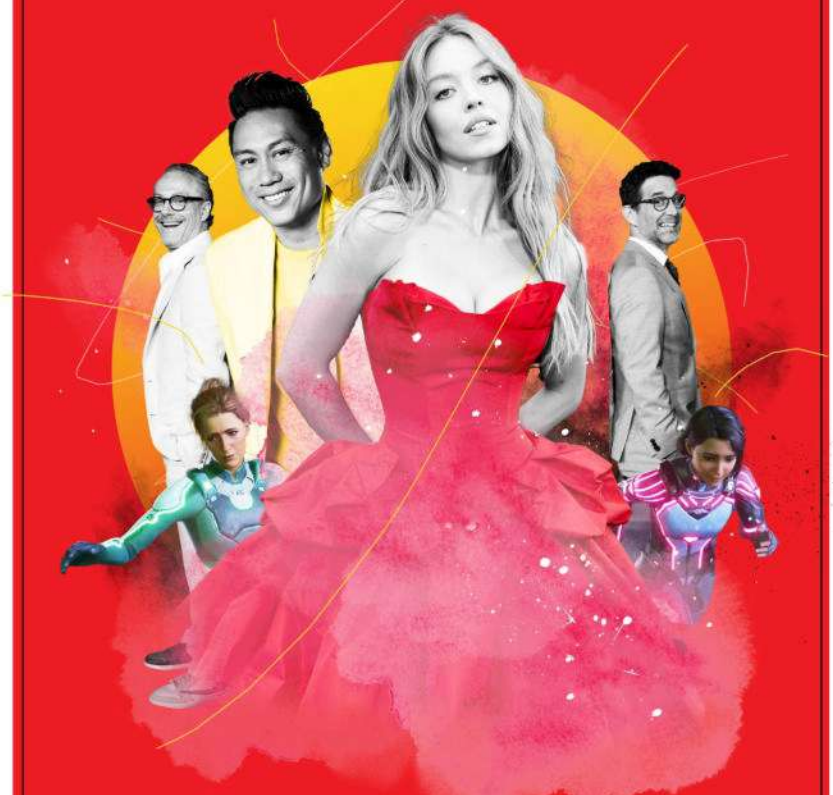
And will we see any well-known faces within this carefully crafted world? "There's definitely going to be some familiarity," Harris promises. This will include, at the very least, an appearance of a new iteration of martial-arts master Iron Fist. Spies, pirates and kung fu experts? Now that's something worth keeping an eye (or two) on.

***EYES OF WAKANDA* WILL BE ON DISNEY+ FROM 1 AUGUST**

Illustration: Russell Moorcroft

NEED TO KNOW

GET UP TO SPEED ON... SPLIT FICTION



IT'S BASED ON AN ACCLAIMED GAME

The 2025 follow-up to couch co-op game *It Takes Two* (2021), *Split Fiction* blends cutting-edge gameplay and inventive storytelling. Designed as a split-screen multiplayer game, it follows struggling writers Mio and Zoe, the former a sci-fi scribe and the latter a fantasy aficionado. The game — a sort-of *Tron*-meets-*Pagemaster* affair — finds the pair trapped in a VR simulation of their shared works, universe-hopping as nefarious corporation Rader Publishing tries to steal their IP and turn it into "content".

IT'S GOT A *WICKED* DIRECTOR

To successfully bring *Split Fiction* from game to screen will require a filmmaker who can tackle worldbuilding on an epic scale, who's at home working across genre spaces, and who has a handle on the art of adaptation. Handily, Jon M. Chu — whose stacked portfolio includes *Wicked*, *In The Heights*, and *Crazy Rich Asians* — hits that trifecta and then some. His knack for human storytelling amid fantastical spectacle will be invaluable here.

SYDNEY SWEENEY IS SET TO STAR

Sweeney has been involved in the project since its announcement. Though we don't know whether the *Immaculate* star will be playing Mio or Zoe just yet, we do know the in-demand actor will produce as well as lead this one. Interestingly, news of Sweeney joining this came just days after we learned she's producing an adaptation of arcade driving game *OutRun* with Michael Bay. Sydney Sweeney = gamer confirmed?

DEADPOOL & WOLVERINE'S WRITERS ARE ON BOARD

When you're working on adapting a story with wild tonal shifts and some heavily meta messaging, who ya gonna call? The answer is, of course, Rhett Reese and Paul Wernick. Yes, the duo behind multiversal mutant caper *Deadpool & Wolverine* are penning *Split Fiction*'s leap to the big screen, so expect at least one or two blue jokes — and perhaps the odd fourth-wall-break — along the way.

ITS STORY CELEBRATES ARTISTS

Amid the AI discourse, *Split Fiction*'s story — at its core one of human creativity's resilience and persistence in the face of corporate greed — couldn't possibly feel more timely. If Chu, Sweeney et al can find a way to translate the joy of playing the game into the experience of watching the movie, then we might be in for a banger. Game on! **JORDAN KING**

***SPLIT FICTION* DOES NOT YET HAVE A UK RELEASE DATE**

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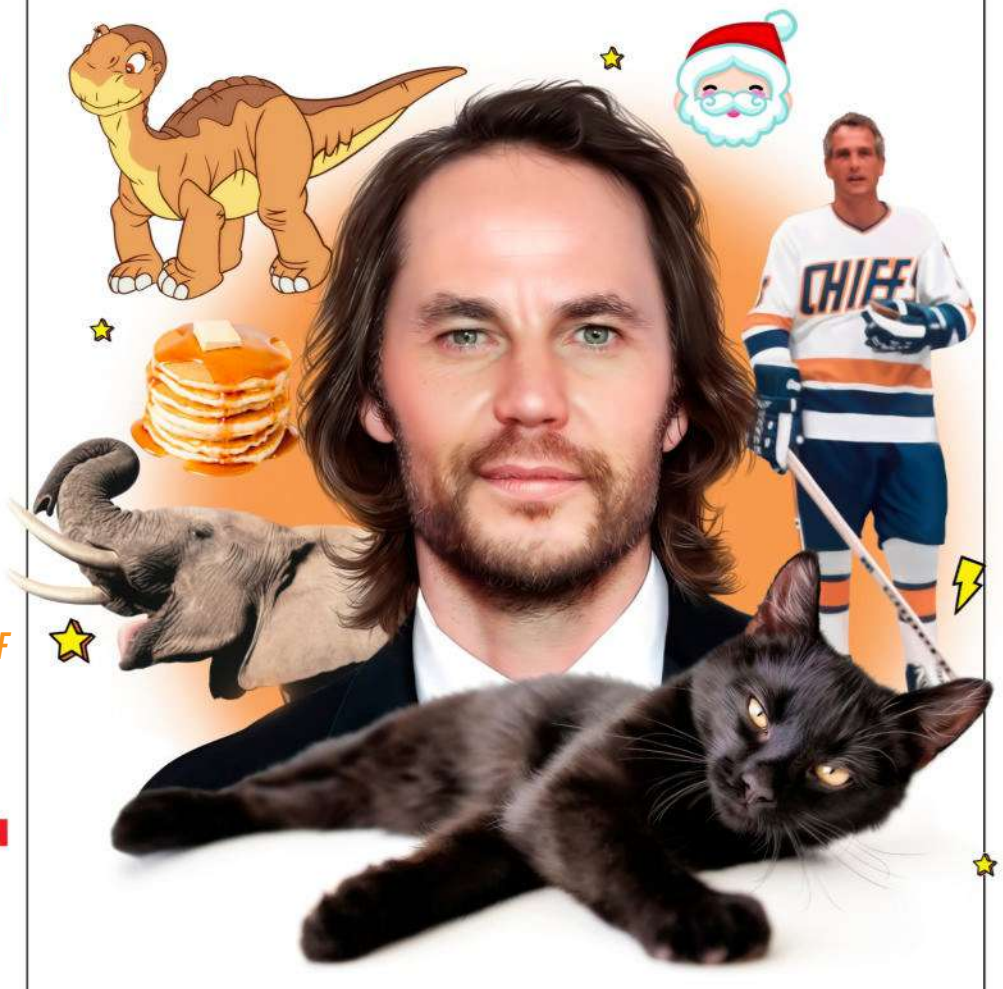
How Much Is A Pint Of Milk?

Taylor Kitsch

THE TERMINAL LIST: DARK WOLF STAR ON HOCKEY LEGENDS AND A RACCOON-FIGHTING CAT



WORDS **BETH WEBB**

ARNO

When were you most starstruck?
My childhood best friend played a couple of games in the NHL [National Hockey League] for the Detroit Red Wings when I was shooting *Friday Night Lights*. [After one game] I was waiting for him in the tunnels of the Joe Louis arena, and I said to myself, "If Steve Yzerman comes by, I've got to say something." I had his posters on my wall growing up. He walked right by me, and I yelled his name and waved him over and I told him, "Hey, man, I'm this young actor and a Canadian kid, and I played hockey my whole life and you're my idol." He couldn't have been nicer, and we still talk to this day.

What was your role in your first-ever school play?
Santa Claus. How fucking good is that? I had the pillow [for a belly], the fake beard, and the most lines. I was definitely ego-driven.

How much is a pint of milk?
No idea. 16 litres.

If you went to a shop and purchased a pint of milk, how much would it cost?
Two dollars 50 cents? I don't drink milk, it's been a long time.

What's the worst smell in the world?
I went to Uganda and worked with WildAid, this great animal awareness and protection foundation. These elephants, who don't know boundaries, were walking over these small village farms and wrecking their crops. One guy figured out if you cut the top off a two-litre Coke bottle and put — I don't know [entirely] what he put in there but it was molasses, shit, and this other concoction. They hung it on their fences, and the elephants wanted nothing to do with it and I totally understand why.

What's the best advice you've ever been given?
When we were doing *Friday Night Lights*, and I was crazy green, Berg [Peter, the show's creator] would scream, "Nobody!" at me. Meaning that nobody else can do what you do. Make this your own. If I haven't spoken to him for a bit I'll just send him a text that says, "Nobody."

If you could time-travel, when and where would you go?
It's funny, [1857-set Netflix series] *American Primeval* is set during arguably the most violent time in US history. It was pretty lawless. At the beginning [of the project] I was like, "This would be an incredible time to be like [Kitsch's character] Isaac and be a mountain man." Then a month into shooting I was like, "Fuck this. This is insane. I would die so quickly." So if I didn't have to engage and could be a fly on the wall, I'd love to go back and see the Shoshone do a Sun Dance.

Which movie have you seen the most?
It would be between *Slap Shot*, with [Paul] Newman, and *The Land Before Time*. It's so intense; one of the characters' mom dies right at the beginning, I remember it like it was yesterday. So I grew up with it, and I kind of co-raised my two younger sisters and made them watch it. They loved it.

Do you have a signature dish?
I make the best breakfast pancakes. I've just found out I'm a coeliac so it's gluten-free oats, I throw a bit of Greek yoghurt on there. It's legit amazing.

Have you got any tattoos?
On my ribs. I got it right before I shot *The Bang Bang Club* in Africa. I was with Connie Britton and we were working for the African Children's Choir. I asked this English teacher who knew Swahili: "What's 'without regret'?" They didn't have a saying like that so she wrote something in makeshift Swahili: "*bila sikitiko*." Which is: "to be without regret".

What was your first pet?
A black cat called Kid. The best cat. He was a warrior. Fought off raccoons. And then, say you came into the same room as me and we had some animosity or beef, he would feel that energy and leave. He wanted nothing to do with people with bad energy, and I loved that.

THE TERMINAL LIST: DARK WOLF IS ON PRIME VIDEO FROM 27 AUGUST

reviews

FILMS, TV, BOOKS, GAMES — ALL THE BIG RELEASES, RATED

31 JULY - 27 AUGUST 2025 | EDITED BY **JOHN NUGENT**

★★★★★ EXCELLENT
★★★★ STRONG
★★★ GOOD
★★ WEAK
★ YIKES

Laura (Sally Hawkins), Oliver (Jonah Wren Phillips) and Tiddles are in for one hell of a time.

Top to bottom: A window into Oliver's world; Caught red-handed; Siblings Piper (Sora Wong) and Andy (Billy Barratt).

FILM

BRING HER BACK

TALK TO ME SOME MORE

★★★★

OUT **1 AUGUST** / CERT **18** / **104 MINS**

DIRECTORS Danny Philippou, Michael Philippou
CAST Sally Hawkins, Billy Barratt, Sora Wong, Jonah Wren Phillips, Sally-Anne Upton

PLOT Siblings Andy (Barratt) and Piper (Wong) are placed in the care of foster mother Laura (Hawkins). Their upbringing goes straight down to hell.

ALL BLIND OPTIMISM and sunny smiles, Sally Hawkins' radiant school teacher, Poppy, was a delight in Mike Leigh's *Happy-Go-Lucky*. But wasn't there a part of us that found her unwavering chirp-and-cheer disposition annoying? Pathological, even? "The road to hell is paved with good intentions," snarled Poppy's repressed driving instructor Scott (Eddie Marsan), and it would seem Danny and Michael Philippou were taking note.

In *Bring Her Back*, the Australian twins behind award-winning horror-comedy videos on YouTube (as RackaRacka) and 2022's electrifying possession movie *Talk To Me* have cast Hawkins as affectionate, ditzy foster mum Laura. A former child-care worker and counsellor, Laura's recovering from the loss of her own daughter when she takes in teenager Andy (Billy Barratt) and his visually impaired younger sister Piper (Sora Wong) after the death of their single father. Laura's grief perhaps explains why she goes overboard with the warm-hearted welcome, and why it's mostly extended to Piper. When she does think to include Andy, it's to join him in slamming shots into the small hours — evidence of a cool kook trying to connect, or plain inappropriate?

More definitively troubling are the glimpses of bat-shit behaviour that are withheld from Andy and Piper but afforded to viewers: Laura snipping a lock of hair from the father's corpse at the funeral; ritualistic circles chalked on the floor; and grainy VHS footage of occult killings. To say too much about how these bad omens fit into the story would be to break its spell. And the same goes for Laura's other charge, Oliver (Jonah Wren Phillips), a mute, shirtless, shaven-skulled child who might have wandered in from *Speak No Evil*. But suffice to say that *Bring Her Back*, though less energetic, anarchic and joltingly plugged into pop culture than *Talk To Me*, shares with the Philippous' debut an interest in childhood trauma, the supernatural and demonstrating (demon-strating?) the thinness of the line between the living and the dead.

This last is achieved with visual flair, as bathroom mist, lashing rain, a rippling swimming pool, a spider-cracked windscreen and that aforementioned blurry video footage build an extended metaphor for the theme of obfuscation, and partially sighted truths. Just as Piper can see only vague shapes and colours (a trope the Philippous arguably exploit too much in search of tension and danger), audiences will find themselves squinting into the murk — and perhaps, at times, sighting a dimension beyond. Such echoes and patterns swirl throughout, with the motif of rounded shapes conjuring thoughts of (black) magic circles, and Cornel Wilczek's infernal score shifting in and out of focus. If there are logic holes and narrative loose-ends that might irk some viewers, they serve the movie's fashioning of an oblique terror that lurks beyond rational comprehension.

Bring Her Back manifests carefully, arranging impressionistic scenes with a seeming haphazardness that matches Laura's colourfully cluttered, isolated house. What begins with an air of mystery and a sense that everything is just a fraction off-beam builds towards an atmosphere of suffocating menace and outright malevolence. And though more serious-minded than *Talk To Me* in its exploration of grief and abuse, this sophomore feature offers splashes of graphic imagery and streaks of cruelty, most of them involving children, that will test the mettle of even hardened horror fans.

That it's wounding to watch is also due to the central trio of actors, who make us care. Barratt and newcomer Wong create a believable bond as the sensitive, tremulously brave siblings, while Hawkins anchors the more outré elements with a naturalistic, shaded performance. This is a carefully calibrated twist on her lovable screen persona — think Mrs Brown, if Paddington's sudden demise sent her a few marmalade sandwiches short of a picnic — and Hawkins invests Laura with real pathos. So while *Bring Her Back* is, in part, an addition to the sub-genre that came to prominence in the '60s and goes by such demeaning names as 'hagsploitation' and 'hag horror' (*What Ever Happened To Baby Jane?*, *Lady In A Cage*), it's also, crucially, a portrait of a woman undone that maintains empathy for its 'monster'. Here, maternal instincts are warped by unfathomable trauma, and Laura's suffering is every bit as affecting as the pain she in turn visits upon Andy and Piper. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

VERDICT **A big hand to the *Talk To Me* directors for navigating the filmic equivalent of that difficult second album. An accomplished and disturbing work, with Sally Hawkins on startling form.**

KEEP 'EM PEELED

The Philippou brothers have hinted that their two feature films, *Talk To Me* and *Bring Her Back*, exist in the same universe — and even on the same Adelaide street. "Don't buy a house in that neighbourhood!" Danny Philippou told *USA Today*.

Clockwise from here: Sheriff Cross (Joaquin Phoenix) and Ted Garcia (Pedro Pascal) — clearly flouting the two-metre rule; Pando pressure builds; Louise (Emma Stone).

FILM

EDDINGTON

ARI ASTER'S UNCONVENTIONAL COVID WESTERN

★★★★

OUT **22 AUGUST** / CERT **TBC** / **149 MINS**

DIRECTOR Ari Aster
CAST Joaquin Phoenix, Pedro Pascal, Luke Grimes, Deirdre O'Connell, Micheal Ward, Austin Butler, Emma Stone

PLOT In the summer of 2020, at the height of the pandemic, the sheriff (Phoenix) of the New Mexico town of Eddington enters into a bitter conflict with the mayor (Pascal).

2020 WAS A hell of a year. It has been both five years and several lifetimes since the Covid-19 pandemic shut down the world, and it remains, arguably, a collective trauma we as a species have yet to process. There have been modest attempts at trying to grapple cinematically with this epochal event, but few have grabbed the subject by its greasy horns quite as fearlessly as Ari Aster does with *Eddington*.

Aster's fourth feature is yet another different tack for the filmmaker: less terrifying than the overt horrors of *Hereditary* and *Midsommar*; less inaccessibly weird than the picaresque odyssey of *Beau Is Afraid*. (No giant penis monsters this time, alas.) Instead it's a heightened but recognisably real comedic satire set during the doldrums of the initial coronavirus outbreak, amid the divisions and conflicts that it sparked, and the pre-existing social and cultural fault lines that it laid bare.

Joaquin Phoenix plays Sheriff Joe Cross, the chief law-enforcement officer of the sleepy New Mexico town of Eddington. Joe cuts a somewhat pathetic figure: greeted with indifference or hostility by his conspiracy-theorist wife Louise (Emma Stone) and her mother Dawn (Deirdre O'Connell); wielding limited power over his two deputies (Luke Grimes and Micheal Ward); and a stubborn anti-masker, just as Covid crests. Yet Aster is careful not to paint with too broad strokes, depicting him as a deeply misguided man concerned about human dignity.

When Joe makes a spontaneous and ill-advised campaign to run for mayor, that puts him squarely into conflict with the existing incumbent: the slick, progressive Ted Garcia (Pedro Pascal). Aster, who grew up in New Mexico, fills the story with localised observations: how the different institutions — the sheriffs, the mayor's office, the indigenous tribal Pueblos — sit uncomfortably next to each other. He observes, too, how pandemic regulations and Black Lives Matter protests widen the divisions — or send people towards slick hucksters like Austin Butler's cult leader Vernon Jefferson Peak. All this fed through the lens of the internet, symbolised by an enormous monolithic data centre being built in the town, leads only to a powder keg. (The director has described the film as "a Western, but the guns are phones").

Naturally, *Eddington* soon descends into total farce, and even as the material openly provokes, Aster films it all with a steady hand and astounding confidence. He keeps a grip on what happens, even while his characters lose it. Not all of his swings hit — the ending may be too bizarrely ambiguous for some — but nobody is making political and cultural satire with this much insight — or chaos. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT **An audacious, farcically funny digest of where we are now, and how we got here: the cinematic equivalent of pandemic primal therapy, a mad scream into the void.**

THE BEAR: SEASON 4

★★★★

OUT **NOW (DISNEY+)** / EPISODES VIEWED **10 OF 10**
SHOWRUNNERS Christopher Storer, Joanna Calo
CAST Jeremy Allen White, Ebon Moss-Bachrach, Ayo Edebiri, Lionel Boyce

Season 3 of *The Bear* was no catastrophe, but Carmy's restaurant and the show itself have both been in dire need of a menu change-up. Sure enough, there's a shift here. The show has always been a slow burn; the difference now is that momentum can be felt in the show's quieter moments too, gently pushing the characters to change and grow rather than recircle the same old traumas. Now eschewing standalone episodes, every main character gets their due, including Sydney's (Ayo Edebiri) showcase in Episode 4 which stands out as a huge highlight. It's an electric return to form, even if it doesn't quite hit the highs served in Seasons 1 and 2. **DO**

SAVAGES

★★★★

OUT **1 AUGUST** / CERT **PG / 86 MINS**
DIRECTOR Claude Barras
CAST Babette De Coster, Martin Verset, Laetitia Dosch, Benoît Poelvoorde

After adopting a monkey, young girl Kéria (Babette De Coster) gets lost in the jungle, uncovering deforestation, a passion for rebellion and her indigenous heritage. A stop-motion eco-fable, *Savages* has surprising moral depth, challenging audiences on the complexities of environmental destruction. Kéria's journey allows her to define her family tree, regardless of any biological roots. Characters are stunningly realised, their vibrant clay figures animated with rich, humane physicality. This is Claude Barras' follow-up to *My Life As A Courgette*, and while the character work isn't as strong, the command of style and narrative ambition remains hugely impressive. **JC**

Feeling blue. **Below:** "Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, it's off to… sorry, wrong film."

FILM

SMURFS

LA LA, LA LA, LA LA, (DON'T) SING A HAPPY SONG

★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **U** / **92 MINS**

DIRECTOR Chris Miller
CAST Rihanna, James Corden, Nick Offerman, JP Karliak, Natasha Lyonne, Kurt Russell, John Goodman

PLOT When Papa Smurf (Goodman) is kidnapped, Smurfette (Rihanna) and No Name (Corden) must rescue him.

WHAT IS THE deal with the Smurfs? It's hard to find anyone who is a genuine fan of the blue-skinned, mushroom-dwelling cartoony creatures — they are, arguably, the worst thing to come out of Belgium since King Leopold II — yet Smurf-based films and TV shows continue, relentlessly, to be made.

Now, by unpopular demand, they're back. Following the advice of Justin Timberlake in *The Social Network* and dropping the 'The', this is another crack at the live-action/animated hybrid format established with 2011's *The Smurfs* — think *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* with none of the charm and James Corden replacing Bob Hoskins. It's a tedious entry in a tedious series, with more than a whiff of corporate mandate about it.

The script, by Pam Brady (a writer on *South Park* and *Hot Rod*), at least shows initial glimmers of self-awareness, gently ribbing the Smurfs' simplistic, characteristic-based naming convention (Brainy, Clumsy, Hefty) — with notable exceptions for Smurfette (whose chief characteristic, presumably, is 'woman') and, most bafflingly in this film, two Smurfs with regular-people names (Ken, Ron). Our hero is a character with no unique trait at all, the humiliatingly named No Name (voiced by Corden).

A wiser, wittier film might have found an interesting angle for No Name's identity crisis.

Instead we have James Corden singing an interminably earnest ballad about "trying to find a reason to be strong", a sentiment we can sympathise with while watching this film. Yes, in addition to their signature 'Sing A Happy Song' (which even the Smurfs themselves here acknowledge is annoying), there are songs in this one. God speed, parents.

A curious Smurf tradition holds that a pop star must voice Smurfette. As the prophecy decrees, Rihanna inherits the role from Demi Lovato and Katy Perry, lending the soundtrack two original numbers. She gives it a good go, but few of the celebrity voice actors here make much of an impression (save for the unmistakable drawl of Natasha Lyonne, voicing Mama Poot, the leader of the mischievous Snooterpoots).

The visuals are hardly much more cheering. Director Chris Miller (no relation to Lord & Miller) opts for a very in-vogue-at-the-moment 2D/3D animation style, which only feels cheap and jarring, especially when the characters enter the live-action world. So much here feels tired and unoriginal — especially a sequence through the multiverse seemingly lifted straight out of *Inside Out*.

Everything is derivative. The plot almost apologetically offers some nonsense about magic books which hold some kind of ill-defined, Infinity Stone-esque power in this universe. The most exciting new wrinkle it can manage is that Razamel, brother of the usual foe Gargamel (both voiced by JP Karliak), is the chief baddie here. (Okay!) It'll please fans of the Smurfs; it's just not clear who exactly they are. Or if they even exist. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT A big old pile of Smurf.

"Stop hounding me!"

FILM

SUPERMAN

NEITHER A BIRD, NOR A PLANE, NOR THE SUPERMAN WE HOPED FOR

★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **12A** / **129 MINS**

DIRECTOR James Gunn
CAST David Corenswet, Rachel Brosnahan, Nicholas Hoult, Skyler Gisondo, Nathan Fillion, Edi Gathegi, Isabela Merced

PLOT Three years after announcing himself to the world, Superman (Corenswet) gets caught up in a brewing war — while Lex Luthor (Hoult) sets out to destroy him.

IT MAY BE the first film in the newly established DC Universe, marking the beginning of James Gunn's reign over a new comic-book behemothian franchise — but with his *Superman*, the *Guardians Of The Galaxy* writer-director chooses to start in the middle. Krypton is gone, Kal-El (David Corenswet) is all grown up, and Superman (plus other metahumans and monsters) are part of everyday life for those on Earth. Clark Kent already works at the *Daily Planet*, is already dating Lois Lane (who already knows his superhero secret), and is already throwing himself into international affairs in the name of saving lives. We're told all this in the first minute via on-screen captions, and the sense of being dropped into a story having missed the crucial first half never really goes away.

To catch you up, here's the situation: Superman interfered in an attack from the fictional nation of Boravia on the fictional nation of Jarhanpur — draw whatever real-world parallels you like here — without any consideration for the geopolitical ramifications. As a result, he's the target of global suspicion as to his reason for being on Earth, and retaliation in the form of genetically enhanced soldiers created by evil baldy billionaire Lex Luthor (Nicholas Hoult), whose ultimate goal is to take Superman down. It's at this moment — just after Superman has lost his first ever fight (off-screen) — that the story starts.

It's not that retreading the Kryptonian's origin story would have been better — but the way *Superman* is constructed requires us to care about a war we have no context for, and the downfall of a hero whose ascension we haven't seen. We're given no sense of who Kal-El is before this, or the world's sentiment towards him, and so aren't equipped to feel any stakes in what happens next.

For all that feels off in the set-up, the performances are solid. Corenswet clearly fits the bill looks-wise, but also manages to convey the deep sense of duty that Superman feels towards Earth. Rachel Brosnahan is spiky and engaging as Lois, breathing life into a role with minimal dimension otherwise. The pair have clear chemistry; an early scene where Lois interviews Clark as Superman in a passionate clash of perspectives is one of the best in the film. Elsewhere, Nathan Fillion is amusing as Green Lantern, egotistical leader of the so-called 'Justice Gang', and *Barry* breakout Anthony Carrigan conveys some heart through a mountain of prosthetics as the element-manipulating Metamorpho. Hoult is having fun as Luthor, dishing out witty comebacks and maniacal screams, as well as genuine flashes of emotion.

But there are problems in the writing. Luthor lacks depth, portrayed simply as an abusive sociopath who's targeting Superman out of spite, and indulging in "reckless science" at the cost of destroying the world entirely. Supes himself, meanwhile, is *almost* the pure-of-heart hero you want him to be, the one that Richard Donner and Christopher Reeve so masterfully achieved in their iteration — but some clunky dialogue and a cocky edge means the character never quite meets the mark.

As shown by the MCU's *Captain America: Civil War*, the question of how governments

WATCH FIRST

Director James Gunn has cited *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022) as an influence on how the filmmakers executed the flying scenes, using cameras mounted on drones to capture many action sequences.

Top to bottom: Lois Lane (Rachel Brosnahan), Jimmy Olsen (Skyler Gisondo) and Clark Kent (David Corenswet); Baldy baddie Lex Luthor (Nicholas Hoult); Great photobomb.

might try to control superpowered beings, and the morality of decision-making under that kind of regime, can be the basis for blockbuster brilliance. Here, the aforementioned interview scene is the only time *Superman* really digs into that, otherwise treating it as a convoluted foundation on which to build a fantastical but flat final showdown. The conflict between Boravia and Jarhanpur is a clangingly on-the-nose representation of current events — but while the movie's stance is commendable, the inclusion of real-life humanitarian crisis as a side-plot in a film this bombastic and snarky feels a little icky.

Visually, *Superman* is bold and bright and full of colour and cosmic invention — an area in which Gunn excels, and a nice change from the desaturated palette of Zack Snyder's interpretation. That keeps the film entertaining for the first hour, but the final act sinks into CGI chaos, with an unsatisfying climax, an eye-roll-inducing reveal, a restlessly intermittent tone, and an insistence on prioritising things and people we don't really care about over core characters.

The biggest saving grace? Krypto, the cheeky, cape-wearing canine sidekick. *Superman* may not be a great movie, but one thing's for sure: Krypto is a very good dog.

SOPHIE BUTCHER

VERDICT David Corenswet takes on the blue-and-red mantle admirably, and glimpses of Gunn's signature sense of fun shine through — but a lack of humanity, originality and cohesion means the movie around them just doesn't work.

Supermarket sweep: Ochi and Yuri (Helena Zengel). **Below:** Willem the conqueror.

FILM

THE LEGEND OF OCHI

A24 GETS INTO THE CUTE CRITTER BUSINESS

★★★

OUT **1 AUGUST** / CERT **12A** / **95 MINS**

DIRECTOR Isaiah Saxon
CAST Helena Zengel, Finn Wolfhard, Emily Watson, Willem Dafoe

PLOT On a secluded island, a headstrong girl (Zengel) journeys to bring an apelike creature home, defying the wishes of her father (Dafoe).

CONTRARY TO INTERNET speculation, AI is not responsible for the saucer-eyed, blue-furred, adorably simian attractions of *The Legend Of Ochi*. No, these are creatures of an older age — that is, the practical-effects heyday of the 1980s, when people still built monsters from elbow grease instead of ones and zeroes. Moving to movies years after conjuring the weird menagerie of Björk's 'Wanderlust' video, director Isaiah Saxon deploys old-school animatronics and puppetry to breathe life into his beasts of the Romanian wild, which roam the woods surrounding a sleepy island village on the Black Sea. The Ochi are charmingly bespoke — and so, on a purely cosmetic level, is everything else in this quirky and vibrantly shot A24 family film. Hey, sometimes they do (hand)make 'em like they used to!

If only Saxon crafted his storybook story as carefully. It feels cobbled together in a less inventive way, like a rummage sale of spare parts from Amblin, Ghibli and Cartoon Saloon. And if one live-action *How To Train Your Dragon* this year wasn't enough, here's another gloss on its unlikely interspecies communion: like forward-thinking Hiccup, young Yuri (*News Of The World*'s Helena Zengel) discovers that the dangerous critters she's been raised to fear

aren't so dangerous, after all. Of course, dragons are big and scaly and fire-breathing. What's the excuse for confusing the cuddly Ochi for killers? Naturally, our fair-haired hero falls fast for the lost, injured youngling she finds: a living plush doll with a Mogwai trill and peepers that make Baby Yoda look homely by comparison.

Maybe it takes a miracle worker of Spielberg's calibre to forge chemistry between a child actor and a special effect, even one this admirably artisanal. Try though the puppeteers do, *The Legend Of Ochi* never quite sells the girl-and-her-monkey kinship, even as it stresses the ways that Yuri feels lost, too, as the daughter of a chieftain (Willem Dafoe) more invested in militarising the island's unruly boys than tending to the needs of his own lonely kid.

For all the emotional constipation of his character, Dafoe lends the material a certain tenderness to go with its deadpan whimsy. He also gets one howling scene of *Lighthouse*-lite ranting — a volatile reunion with the girl's estranged mother, played by an equally grubby and severe Emily Watson. These veteran performers' wearied features are their own kind of special effect, as invaluable as the lush matte-painting scenery and woolly wildlife worthy of Jim Henson. Such manmade wonders deserved less familiar storytelling; much more so than the verdant imagery, it's Saxon's thin, hodgepodge tale that feels generated by keyword. **A.A. DOWD**

VERDICT The first feature from music-video director Isaiah Saxon boasts wondrous old-school creature effects, but they've been applied to a rather derivative fable, an eccentric but skimpy Amblin wannabe.

Here: It's a dog's life for Jessica (Megan Stalter). **Below:** Will Sharpe plays Jessica's love interest.

TV

TOO MUCH

LENA DUNHAM GOES ACROSS THE POND

★★★★

OUT **NOW (NETFLIX)** / EPISODES VIEWED **10 OF 10**

SHOWRUNNERS Lena Dunham, Luis Felber
CAST Megan Stalter, Will Sharpe, Michael Zegen, Richard E. Grant, Naomi Watts, Lena Dunham

PLOT After a traumatic break-up, Jessica (Stalter) moves from New York to London for work, where she falls for musician Felix (Sharpe).

IT IS A TRUTH universally acknowledged, that a single American girl in possession of a one-way ticket to London, must be in want of her own Mr Darcy. We've seen it before, and we see it again here in Lena Dunham's *Too Much*, which combines the incisive honesty of her seminal 2010s drama *Girls* with the swooning romance of executive producers Tim Bevan and Eric Fellner's *Notting Hill* and *Love Actually*.

Based loosely on Dunham's experiences of moving to the UK and meeting her now-husband, *Too Much* follows aspiring director Jessica (Megan Stalter), who heads to London in search of a fresh start, and the kind of idyllic English life she's absorbed from all her favourite movies. There, she meets the charming but complicated Felix (Will Sharpe) and sparks soon fly — but so too does self-sabotage, and both must try to work through their own issues to keep their love story going.

Stalter brings all the unhinged-but-loveable energy from her breakout role as Kayla in *Hacks*; so much so that in the first few episodes, she feels a little one-dimensional as the script works to set up her big personality. But once the series settles, she's given a lot more depth, and Stalter's unique presence shines through. Her adjustment to British culture and slang ("bollocking" proves particularly challenging) sets up a lot of laughs, and it's always meaningful to see the narrow

margins of the type of actor who can play a romantic lead be expanded.

Most impressive, though, is Sharpe as Felix. With his floppy, curly hair, scuffed nail polish and sardonic wit, he embodies the indie-sleaze ideal — but he is also remarkably tender, shedding several tears while watching *Paddington* in one of the most adorable scenes you'll have seen in a while. His backstory is slower to unfurl, but punches you in the gut when it does, and Sharpe expertly expresses Felix's turbulent inner life with incredible subtlety and empathy. The list of guest stars is also astounding (at times, almost distracting) — including Richard E. Grant, Naomi Watts, Andrew Scott (wonderfully excruciating as a douchebag director), Jennifer Saunders, Adèle Exarchopoulos (given a rare chance at comedy) and many more.

If you're not keen on Dunham's sensibility, *Too Much* is unlikely to convert you. But if you are, this is a joyous reminder of what she does best: constructing relationships that seem both heightened and intensely real; writing dialogue that feels as though she plucked it from your deepest, darkest thoughts; cutting through tragedy with humour and self-awareness; exposing the messiest parts of love, sex, bodies and familial tension. There are several sequences (and some entire characters) that test your patience in their 'too much-ness', but when it comes to Jessica and Felix's core connection, there is more than enough substance to keep you invested. **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

VERDICT **It occasionally lives up to its name, but overall, *Too Much* is a funny, sexy, moving love story. And *Girls* fans will get a kick out of seeing Dunham's slightly softer side.**

TV

FOUNDATION: SEASON 3

★★★★

OUT **NOW (APPLE TV+)** / EPISODES VIEWED **10 OF 10**
SHOWRUNNER Bill Bost
CAST Lee Pace, Jared Harris, Lou Llobell, Pilou Asbæk, Cassian Bilton

On its arrival in 2021, *Foundation* established itself as an uncompromising and sometimes disorientatingly dense series. Building on and expanding Isaac Asimov's series of novels, it presented itself as a dizzying cocktail of wild ideas, and quickly established itself as some of the most exceptional sci-fi around. The series continues to build a compellingly complex narrative while underpinning its ideas with an engaging spread of similarly complex characters. This may not be television's most accessible show — a rewatch of the first two seasons is all but essential — but if you're prepared to put down that second screen and strap in, this is one of the most rewarding shows around. **JD**

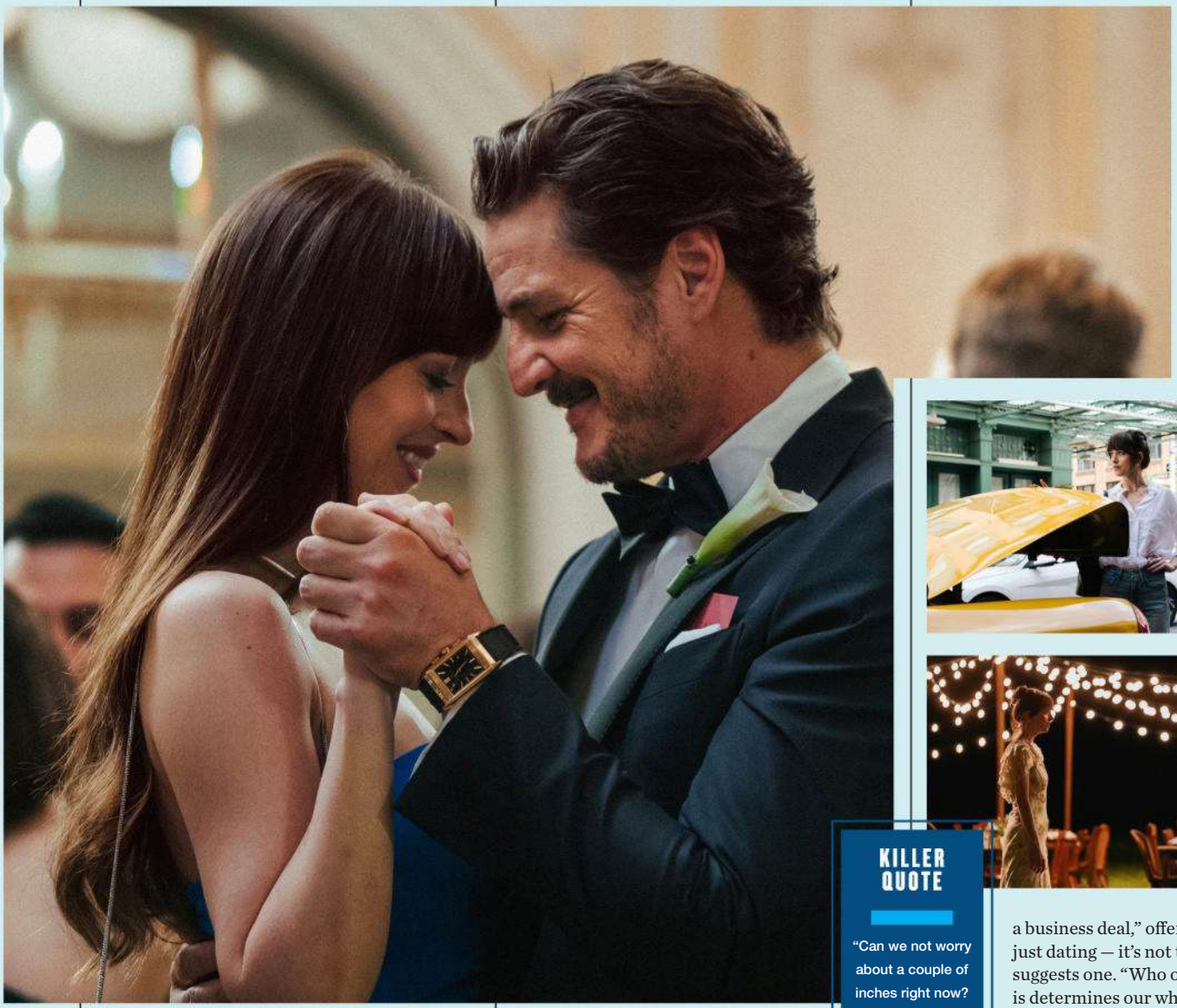
FILM

SORRY, BABY

★★★★

OUT **22 AUGUST** / CERT **TBC / 103 MINS**
DIRECTOR Eva Victor
CAST Eva Victor, Naomi Ackie, Lucas Hedges, John Carroll Lynch

Unlike some other cinematic reckonings with #MeToo, Eva Victor's first feature is devoid of sensationalism. Victor plays Agnes, a young academic whose college contemporaries tick off milestones, while her own life seems to be stagnant. As a student, she was sexually assaulted; the film provides a time-zigzagging account of how she processes this, with help from her bestie (Naomi Ackie) and an irresistible feline friend. But this is no trauma-triggered origin story, with Agnes refusing to bend to societal expectations. A bracingly fresh, thoughtful and tenderly funny debut which delivers its most poignant moments over delicious sandwiches, its dexterous balancing of light and dark is reminiscent of *Manchester By The Sea*. **MB**



Clockwise from main: Magic dance: Lucy (Dakota Johnson) and minted Harry (Pedro Pascal); Given the boot?; With ex John (Chris Evans).

FILM

MATERIALISTS

MEET CELINE SONG'S LATEST LOVE TRIANGLE

★★★★

OUT **15 AUGUST** / CERT **15** / **117 MINS**

DIRECTOR Celine Song
CAST Dakota Johnson, Pedro Pascal, Chris Evans, Zoë Winters, Marin Ireland

PLOT New York matchmaker Lucy (Johnson) finds herself having to decide between two suitors: wealthy eligible bachelor Harry (Pascal) and her less well-off ex, John (Evans).

THE OPENING OF *Materialists* is not what you might expect from a modern-day, New York-set romantic-comedy. It begins in a cave — the least romantic of all places, surely — with an enigmatic and strangely beautiful wordless prologue, in which a caveman presents a cavewoman with a wedding ring made of flowers. Early doors, writer-director Celine Song is subverting our expectations, arguing that love is and always has been a primal, ancient, essential dance. This is fundamental stuff.

So much of *Materialists* is not what you might expect from a romcom. Like her feature-film debut, the exquisite 2023 drama *Past Lives*, it's a grown-up and thoughtful look at how adults actually feel and interact in the real world — and, like that last film, features three people with possibly conflicting desires. Cannily, Song centres the action around someone whose entire professional life is in love: matchmaker Lucy (Dakota Johnson, brilliantly poised and powerful) is an expert at dating maths, responsible for nine marriages, and a friend, confidante and effective therapist to her clients. But her personal life does not match up to these standards — until hunky rich person Harry (Pedro Pascal) and equally hunky poor person John (Chris Evans), her ex, (re)enter her life.

Where so much of *Past Lives* was found in the unspoken, in the profound silences, much of *Materialists* unfolds in dialogue. Song leans on her playwright past to craft a dense, witty, verbose script, full of competing theses on modern relationships, especially in New York's famously ruthless dating scene. "Love is the last religion," offers one character. "Marriage is a business deal," offers another. "It's just dating — it's not that serious," suggests one. "Who our partner is determines our whole life," counters another.

KILLER QUOTE

"Can we not worry about a couple of inches right now? Because you're about to die alone."
LUCY (DAKOTA JOHNSON)

This is a film with the costume of a romcom but a brain and heart to challenge easy tropes. Dating, we are told here, is a question of value, a symbol of status and worth. But what happens when people are simply commodified into merchandise? And why would anyone engage in modern dating if it's actually highly unpleasant, driven by obsessions with height, and rife with "known risks" for women, as one character coldly puts it?

Yet, as those cave people remind us, we still do it. The outlook here is cynical but hopeful. Song does engage in a bit of movie-star fantasy, her three leads always impeccably dressed and implausibly beautiful, and while it chastely lacks some much-needed sexual tension or frisson — not to mention the searing, aching yearning of *Past Lives* — there is something undeniably pleasing about watching gorgeous people intelligently navigate love in a meaningful way. To unravel these mysteries, we finally understand, is an ancient need.

JOHN NUGENT

VERDICT **A different beast to *Past Lives*, this is a razor-sharp look at the competitive marketplace of dating: both rigorously honest and idealistically romantic.**

BOOKS

SCREAMING AND CONJURING

DO YOU LIKE (READING ABOUT) SCARY MOVIES?

★★★

AUTHOR **CLARK COLLIS**

IT MAY SEEM hard to conceive now, but there was a time when people didn't like being scared in cinemas. In the mid-1990s, horror seemed to be less a Thing From Outer Space, more a thing of the past: a dormant cinematic genre which had long since said goodbye to the heydays of the '30s and the '70s. Then in 1996, along came Wes Craven's seminal slasher *Scream* — sparking a renaissance which continues to this day.

That's the basis for *Screaming And Conjuring: The Resurrection And Unstoppable Rise Of The Modern Horror Movie*, a new book by former *Entertainment Weekly* writer Clark Collis (who previously wrote the excellent *Shaun Of The Dead* history *You've Got Red On You*). As the title suggests, it begins with Craven's surprise word-of-mouth hit — "The genre was dying, and *Scream* saved it," notes horror founding father George A. Romero — and ends with 2013's *The Conjuring* establishing a giant franchise, the health of the genre by then fully assured. In-between is an exhaustive and only occasionally exhausting account.

There's deep, rich research here, and a clutch of new interviews, from scream queens (Jamie Lee Curtis, Neve Campbell) to behind-the-camera legends (Sam Raimi, Greg Nicotero). Collis unearths some fun stories: Jamie Kennedy's dad having hummus with Steven Seagal at the *Scream* premiere; Kevin Bacon having Vaseline rubbed onto his penis for *Hollow Man*; Craven's love of birdwatching.

Where the book slightly suffers is in its meticulous approach, chronicling practically every American horror film across the two decades. (Asian horror, despite having an equally fertile output during this period, only earns a brief mention.) As well as the big hitters — *The Sixth Sense, Saw, Paranormal Activity* — many obscure entries are explored, both good (the underrated 1997 vampire movie *Habit*) and questionable (*Leprechaun: Back 2 Tha Hood*), but the encyclopaedic method comes at the expense of real insight or personality. This is strictly business, with Collis diligently listing the opening-weekend box office for each film highlighted, as if a trade paper — space that could have been given to critical analysis, or more of a point of view. It's curious why the book ends when it does, too, with major works like *Get Out* only allowed a throwaway mention in the epilogue.

Still, a story does emerge across the pages: how the early-2000s rise of DVDs coincided with the genre's success; how the politics of the time interacted with and in some cases disrupted filmmakers' plans; and how a few studios came to dominate the space, from the torture-loving Lionsgate to the low-budget-deploying Blumhouse. And the book's conclusion cannot be disputed: the future of horror, Collis writes, is "blood-red rosy". People still love to be scared. **JOHN NUGENT**

Ghostface gets to the point in *Scream*.

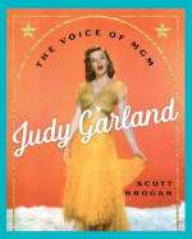
VERDICT The breadth and depth of this horror history is impressive — even if the focus sometimes leaves a little to be desired.

DARKNESS VISIBLE

★★★★★

AUTHOR **JOHN BLEASDALE**

Darkness Visible is a perfect title for John Bleasdale's second filmmaker retrospective, an illuminating dissection of Oscar-winning filmmaker Jonathan Glazer's subversive oeuvre. As discerning in his treatment of Glazer's Radiohead music videos and Stella Artois commercials as, say, *Sexy Beast*, Bleasdale's fluid prose and incisive criticism brilliantly shines a light on one of British cinema's most important filmmakers. **JK**

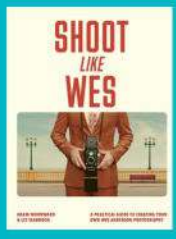


JUDY GARLAND: THE VOICE OF MGM

★★★★

AUTHOR **SCOTT BROGAN**

There have been plenty of Judy Garland biographies, but none that focus purely on her time as the effective emblem for musical-heavy studio MGM. Writer Scott Brogan is an engaging chronicler of this period, in which studio and star were inextricably linked, unearthing stories and treasures from the archives — Garland's 1935 contract and unseen publicity photos — while not shying away from her darker personal troubles. **IN**



SHOOT LIKE WES

★★★★

AUTHORS **ADAM WOODWARD, LIZ SEABROOK**

More effective as a beautifully presented collection of essays on Wes Anderson's distinctive visual style than as a beginner's guide on how to emulate it, Adam Woodward and Liz Seabrook's aptly titled *Shoot Like Wes* nevertheless offers something rare: a refreshing approach to understanding one of contemporary cinema's most scrutinised auteurs. Well worth a centrally aligned slot on any film/photography enthusiast's shelf. **JK**

The only way to stay safe with Krypto around.

TV

IRONHEART

WE DON'T LOVE IT 3000

★★

OUT **NOW (DISNEY+)** / EPISODES VIEWED **6 OF 6**

SHOWRUNNER Chinaka Hodge
CAST Dominique Thorne, Anthony Ramos, Lyric Ross, Alden Ehrenreich, Regan Aliyah, Manny Montana

PLOT In order to fund her armoured suit, genius inventor Riri Williams (Thorne) falls in with a gang of criminals led by the Hood (Ramos). As events escalate, she is forced to confront the price of her ambitions.

IT'S BEEN THREE years since the Marvel Cinematic Universe introduced genius inventor Riri Williams (Dominique Thorne) in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*. Though Thorne made her presence felt in that blockbuster, *Ironheart* — a six-episode miniseries created by Chinaka Hodge and executive-produced by Ryan Coogler — presents a prime opportunity to spotlight her burgeoning superhero in a big way. But while the added focus on her world is welcome, it's in service of a character that's difficult to warm to, in a story that fails to truly ignite.

Where the comics have Riri fighting villains as soon as she crafts her first suit of armour, Hodge and co take her in a very different direction. In this series, she teams up with a gang of criminals led by Parker Robbins, aka 'the Hood' (Anthony Ramos), on multiple nefarious jobs. Making a deal with the devil in order to build an armoured suit and fulfil creative ambitions without the resources of Tony Stark is a solid starting point, even if the rich themes of access and privilege go mostly unexplored.

But it ends up being the first in a mountain of selfish, morally questionable decisions that make Riri hard to root for over the season. This is the most aggressively unheroic 'hero' the MCU has ever produced; rarely does she save or fight for someone other than herself. And if you were hoping for some impressive armoured action, manage your expectations: the VFX may look polished, but those scenes are mostly restricted to flying until the finale.

Though the central narrative underwhelms, there are occasional bright spots. The relationship between Riri and her best-friend-turned-AI Natalie (later known as N.A.T.A.L.I.E., this character's take on J.A.R.V.I.S.) is brought to life beautifully by Thorne and Lyric Ross. Everything from the way they talk to each other to the Chicago community they inhabit and the winning soundtrack is wonderfully observed, a clear by-product of the many Black voices both in front of and behind the camera (including directors Sam Bailey and Angela Barnes). Additionally, this grounded corner of the MCU is smartly woven into its more magical elements, leading to the introduction of a major character who will surely be a recurring presence in future movies and shows.

But while that's not nothing, it's also not enough to make you walk away from this show feeling satisfied. When the final episode concludes, we're left wondering what the point of it all was when the lead character is still making selfish choices, still showcasing a frustrating lack of growth. If we get to see the continuation of Riri's journey, much tinkering will be required to ensure her next chapter is worth the investment. **AMON WARMANN**

VERDICT **Despite some nice flourishes and big introductions, Riri — and *Ironheart* — still hasn't taken full flight. If Season 2 does come, some serious upgrades are required.**

GAMES

DUNE: AWAKENING

HE WHO CONTROLS THE VIDEO GAME, CONTROLS THE UNIVERSE!

★★★★

PC, PS5, XBOX SERIES X|S

Pure sandemonium.

"FIND THE FREMEN, wake the sleeper." You probably don't remember that from either Frank Herbert's original *Dune* novels or Denis Villeneuve's films, but it's the starting impulse for this survival-focused MMO, set in a timeline where Paul Atreides was never born.

Despite that seismic departure from canon, *Awakening* is an unabashed love letter to Herbert's world, both thematically and in its brilliantly authentic depiction of the planet Arrakis. The desperate hunt for even the tiniest droplets of water will leave you parched in reality, while the game's depiction of strange technology — from stillsuits to flittering ornithopters — and complex interplanetary politics between rival houses comes straight from the page. It captures the feel of the universe perfectly.

As a custom character — your choice of home planet, background and mentor affecting abilities and, later, how others interact with you — you'll be dropped into the unforgiving wastes and largely left to fend for yourself. Cue plenty of foraging, crafting and hunting for spice, all while seeking clues to the whereabouts of the Fremen. The sun is appropriately deadly — you'll develop heatstroke if out of the shade for too long — so you'll need to stay as hydrated as possible, and seek shelter from sandstorms. Darting between outcroppings of rock as you raid camps or seek resources, you'll also need to avoid the iconic sandworms, their emergence from the desert as thrilling as it is terrifying.

Combat is a mixed affair, though. While you can eventually craft some impressive weaponry, that attention to *Dune* lore means many enemies are equipped with Holtzman shields, repelling ranged fire and quicker melee attacks. That turns many encounters into dances where you'll try to pierce those shields with slow attacks — authentic, yes, but also a bit of a slog.

That slog is *Awakening*'s only real issue — like Herbert's prose, the game occasionally flirts with the laborious, not helped by frequent shifts in focus. The initial survival factor gives way to something closer to a dense RPG, then pivots again to a brutal player-versus-player experience in an ever-shifting 'Deep Desert', battling for the glory of House Atreides or House Harkonnen. It often feels like three games in one, its elements not always blending together smoothly.

Despite that, there's a real satisfaction in taming a world that wants to leave you as little more than a desiccated husk, one made doubly appealing by being so immersed in *Dune* lore. *Awakening* makes you work for every victory, and if you can rise to the not inconsiderable challenge, it will get its Maker hooks in you and refuse to let go. **MATT KAMEN**

VERDICT **Like its imposing locale, *Dune: Awakening* is vast and intimidating for those unable to meet its demands, but anyone willing to tackle Arrakis on its own terms will find this a dream.**

TRON: CATALYST

★★★

PC, SWITCH, PS5, XBOX SERIES S/X

Disc-slinging and Light Cycle action abound in this top-down *Tron* adventure. After a mysterious package explodes, courier Exo gets the power to mess with time — and is now on the run. Designed for short sessions, this bite-sized title channels the best of mobile games with tight combat that clicks. While the introduction of time-bending abilities feels underdeveloped, this is still a refreshing return to the Grid. **HS**

MARIO KART WORLD

★★★★★

SWITCH 2

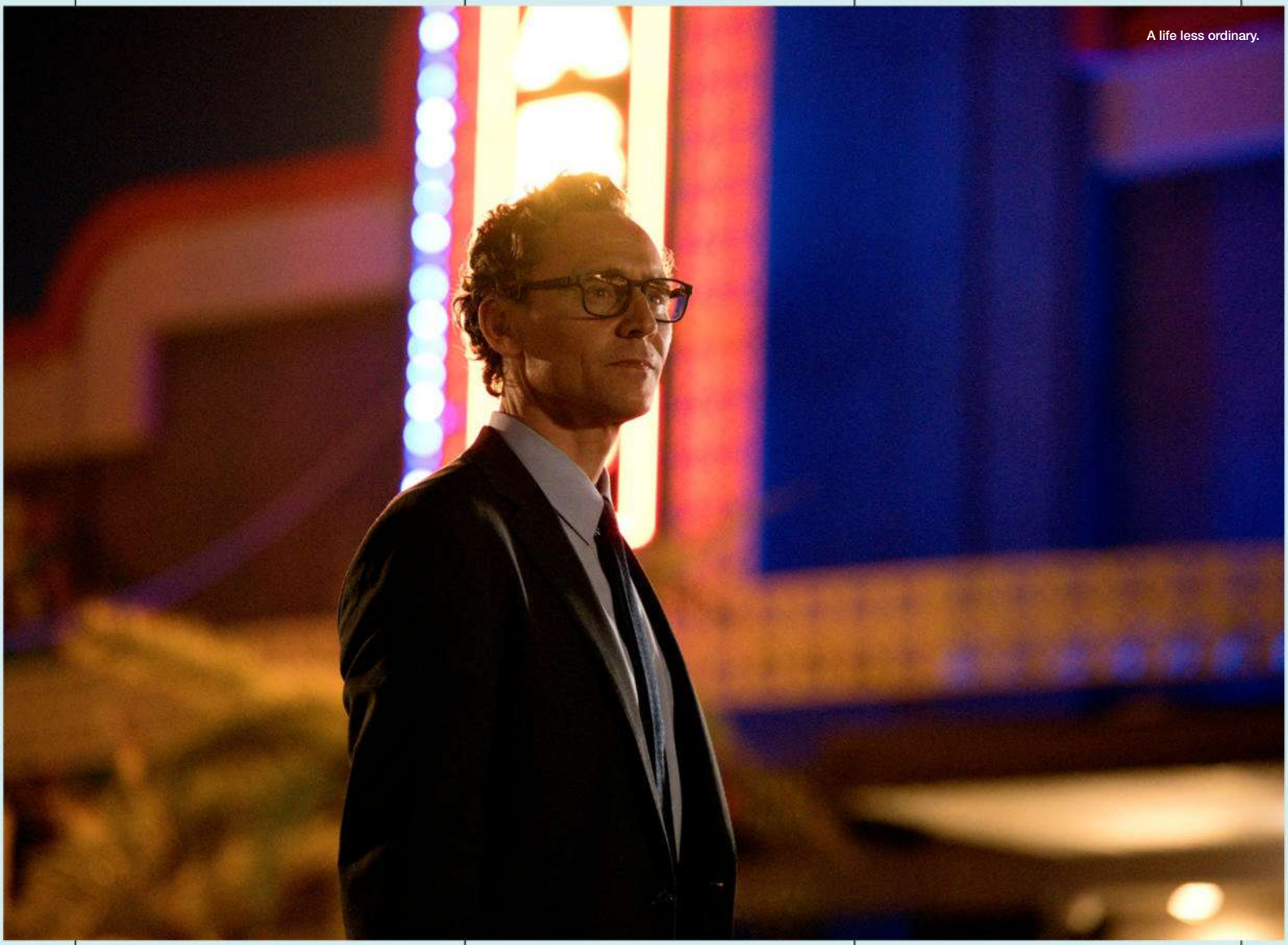
Mario and pals go off-road for a cartoony twist on *Forza Horizon.* Players zoom around the Mushroom Kingdom between races, hunting down collectibles and completing trick-driving challenges, giving solo players a lot to do. The game truly lives in multiplayer, though, especially with new map-wide rallies and nail-biting elimination races. Stunning visuals and smooth performance make this the ultimate Switch 2 launch title. **MK**

SURVIVAL KIDS

★★★

SWITCH 2

Debuting on the original Game Boy in 1999, this cult-classic survival game is rebooted with a multiplayer focus. After repeatedly crashing on deserted islands, you'll need to craft, forage and build your way off each one. This skews younger — think of it as 'my first survival game' — but with each island essentially its own puzzle, it's perfect for families to play through together. **MK**



A life less ordinary.

FILM

THE LIFE OF CHUCK

TOM HIDDLESTON IS THE MAN WHO WOULD BE (STEPHEN) KING

★★★★

OUT **22 AUGUST** / CERT **15** / **111 MINS**

DIRECTOR Mike Flanagan
CAST Tom Hiddleston, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Annalise Basso, Mark Hamill, Mia Sara, Karen Gillan, Jacob Tremblay

PLOT A backwards journey through the life of Charles 'Chuck' Krantz (Hiddleston), from the Apocalypse to his spooky childhood.

LIKE ROB REINER and Frank Darabont, Mike Flanagan has made Stephen King adaptations a speciality. But while *Gerald's Game* and *Doctor Sleep* felt no less ripe for cinematic treatment than, say, *Misery* or *Rita Hayworth And Shawshank Redemption*, King's 2020 novella *The Life Of Chuck* seems a peculiar choice. Hardly a genre banger, it is the story of an average man's life told in reverse. And rather than plucking at one strand or refitting the material entirely, Flanagan has boldly gone for a faithful take. Like the novella, he's even divided his film into three chapters, thereby risking the dangers of the anthology movie.

It opens strongly with a curious apocalypse tale. But there are no storm clouds or explosions in this Armageddon. Just sunny skies and quiet streets, with people reflecting on their existential predicament. Disasters are reported (from Pornhub going down to a volcano in Germany) though not witnessed, making it feel affectingly relatable — but for the metaphysical quirk that has billboards, TV ads and sky-writing celebrating "39 great years" of some guy named Charles Krantz (Tom Hiddleston). Fronted by Chiwetel Ejiofor and Karen Gillan, this is the best-performed segment. There's a good chance you'll be weeping before the first half-hour is done.

The middle chapter is powerful in a very different way. Bringing Hiddleston to the fore, it presents Chuck himself. This suit-and-tied accountant rekindles his inner dancer after being seized by the rhythm of a busking drummer (Taylor Gordon, aka viral drummer The Pocket Queen), and with Hiddles busting some truly impressive moves, we receive a heady dose of pure, unfiltered joy. We're used to seeing terrible things happen to people in Flanagan's work; here we couldn't be further up the other end of the scale.

The final part concerns Chuck as a child, wrestling with his love of dance and his grandfather's (Mark Hamill) expectations that he goes into finance, while curious about the supposedly haunted cupola in their home. Sadly, as in the source material, this segment lacks the tonal clarity of the previous two, and so isn't quite the rousing crescendo one might hope for.

The Life Of Chuck is destined to divide people. There's little chance you'll walk out with the same opinion as everyone else you saw it with. But that feels key to its appeal. This movie's doing something unexpected, something that, frankly, not everyone's gonna dig, with all its genre-hopping, narrative idiosyncrasy, and insistence on quoting Walt Whitman. It's trying to say something about, well, *life*, and its intrinsic value, without winking or glibness or worrying about being 'cool'. In short, it's effectively a movie that's happy to dance like nobody's watching. **DAN JOLIN**

VERDICT **Part end-of-the-world drama, part musical, part coming-of-age ghost story, *The Life Of Chuck* won't please everyone. But, if you open yourself to its brazen sincerity, you might just shed a life-affirming tear or two.**

Swimming with shark: Steven Spielberg and cast on watery location.

FILM

JAWS @ 50

WE'RE GOING TO NEED A BIGGER DOCUMENTARY

★★★★

OUT **NOW (DISNEY+)** / CERT **TBC / 89 MINS**

DIRECTOR Laurent Bouzereau
PARTICIPANTS Steven Spielberg, John Williams, James Cameron, Steven Soderbergh, J.J. Abrams, Jordan Peele, Robert Zemeckis, Guillermo del Toro, George Lucas

PLOT Crew, filmmakers and fans look back on the cinematic phenomenon of *Jaws* on its 50th anniversary.

THERE IS LITTLE that's new to say about *Jaws*: it's one of the greatest films ever made, but its production was famously troubled. In the five decades since its release, all those involved have told their stories until they're as well scrubbed and sanded as any boat captain could wish, so any *Jaws*head will have heard or read much of this film's content before. That said, if you're a completist or just want to celebrate the 50th anniversary, this is an affectionate and thorough look at the elements that made *Jaws* endure.

Director Laurent Bouzereau has a long history of 'making of' documentaries and films on film; he even made a *Jaws* documentary previously, for the 20th anniversary LaserDisc in 1995. He's worked with Spielberg for years and made last year's moving *Music By John Williams* about his composer, so we should not be surprised that his access is extraordinary. You could possibly say that his close ties to the director make this smell a little of hagiography, but that would be ungenerous. This is, after all, explicitly a 50th anniversary celebration of a film universally acknowledged as a great, so some element of celebration is called for, but it's also been long enough that these interviews can talk openly about Shaw's alcoholism, Spielberg's stress and the studio's fears without qualms.

More importantly, the material is there: Bouzereau has combed the archives to find outtakes of the Alex Kintner death, for example, with the boy himself narrating the experience, and even includes a little discussion of Spielberg's ill-fated decision to allow cameras to follow him for the Oscar nominations.

Bouzereau also gets most of Hollywood's directorial A-list to comment: James Cameron, Steven Soderbergh, J.J. Abrams, Jordan Peele, Robert Zemeckis, Guillermo del Toro and George Lucas reminisce about the film and discuss its continuing influence. But Bouzereau also reaches out to bit-players to add their own memories. Jonathan Filley, who played Cassidy, the boy who almost went swimming with the first victim, holds up his onscreen costume (it still fits now). There's a real charm in such minutiae.

Towards the end, Spielberg talks movingly about the trauma he experienced making *Jaws*; something he now calls PTSD. He had nightmares for years afterwards that he was still directing the movie, horribly behind schedule and over budget, and eventually treated his condition by sneaking aboard the Orca on the Universal Studios lot and hunkering down in the cabin, unnoticed, to relive the shoot. His clear-eyed memories are fascinating: the film made possible everything that followed, and gave him final cut, but was also one of the hardest experiences of his life. He's grateful, but scarred — much like his audience. **HELEN O'HARA**

VERDICT **There's little here that's new or shocking for hardcore fans, and nothing to rock even a small boat, but this is a pleasantly comprehensive and wide-ranging celebration of the shark-centric gamechanger.**

They weren't feeling very animated. **Below:** Kitty Kat with her crew.

FILM

THE BAD GUYS 2

THEY'RE NOT BAD — THEY'RE JUST DRAWN THAT WAY

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **PG** / **104 MINS**

DIRECTOR Pierre Perifel
CAST Sam Rockwell, Marc Maron, Craig Robinson, Anthony Ramos, Awkwafina, Zazie Beetz, Richard Ayoade

PLOT After their imprisonment, the Bad Guys struggle to reintegrate into society — and are drawn back into old habits by a new crew of thieves.

THE MAIN JOY of self-described "animated caper" *The Bad Guys* — the 2022 film based on the books of the same name — came in the way it blended *Ocean's Eleven*-style heist action with Looney Tunes-style zany physics. As with its predecessor, this sequel builds a moral parable on top of all this, though this time around with a little less pandering to a young audience through childish jokes.

We find Wolf (Sam Rockwell, doing his best Clooney impersonation), Snake (Marc Maron), Tarantula (Awkwafina), Shark (Craig Robinson) and Piranha (Anthony Ramos, working with very little) all struggling to become part of the normal world after doing time in prison. Eviction notices and late bills loom, while job offers seem like a pipe dream. The criminal lifestyle they left behind soon becomes more alluring, especially when the new antagonists pose them the question: why should they try to assimilate into a world that will never trust them?

The difficulties of reintegration is an interesting story-thread for a family-friendly film, and a satisfying follow-up to the first instalment, which lightly gestured at the limits of prison to rehabilitate anyone. These are themes which will fly over the heads of its young audience, but it still stands out, even as *The Bad Guys 2* finds rather simplistic answers to the questions it poses. "Respect is earned!" one character insists, in response to another correctly pointing out that some prejudices are hard to overcome.

As in the first, returning director Pierre Perifel leans on the cartoonish fun of gentleman-thief anime *Lupin III* as a guiding star — you can see it in the way Wolf tries to swim through the air, or in the love/hate relationship between the Bad Guys and the brawny police commissioner. That sense is underlined by the graphic, dynamic stylings of its animation, which makes inventive use of 2D drawings in a 3D space for the odd visual emphasis, special effect or texture.

While the writing can get a little too cute — one of the key items of the film is called 'MacGuffinite' — for the most part the comedy is a lot sharper this time around, especially as it works through the rather lovely, anime-inspired visuals. Some simple but punchy cutaway gags break up the more chaotic chases, while the dialogue feels like it makes more of a concerted effort to give the parental audience something to have fun with, despite its continuing insistence on excessive fart jokes. But, as the film itself suggests, rehabilitation takes time and patience.

KAMBOLE CAMPBELL

VERDICT **Though it can be predictable and a little simple, *The Bad Guys 2* smooths over some of the frustrations of the first — bringing a sharper and (slightly) more mature sense of humour to its compellingly cartoonish animation.**

also out

HEAD TO EMPIREONLINE.COM TO READ THESE REVIEWS IN FULL

M3GAN 2.0

★★★★ FILM

"There are potential quibbles to be had but when you're watching two plastic dolls neck-snap their way through the world, life is good. We can't wait for the next system upgrade. Slay, queen!" **JOHN NUGENT**

THE OLD GUARD 2

★★ FILM

"What it accomplishes is barely a movie. It's an unfinished concept underpinned by soap-opera dramatics, and for every emotional beat posed, there is a bizarre, rushed set-up for 'The Old Guard 3'."

KELECHI EHENULO

THE SANDMAN: SEASON 2, VOLUME 1

★★★ TV

"With more difficult material to adapt, this half-season suffers in comparison to Season 1, but there's just enough quality to keep you on board for the final volume. The later upturn is encouraging for the final instalments." **DAN JOLIN**

THE INSTITUTE

★★★ TV

"Enjoyable in its pulpy sensibility, this series is darker yet simpler than comparable stories, but no less entertaining. This won't be the best Stephen King adaptation you see this year, but it almost certainly won't be the worst either." **DAVID OPIE**

FOUR LETTERS OF LOVE

★★ FILM

"The scenery is stunning, the accents mostly steady and it's hard to root against young lovers. But there's little else to sink your teeth into in this shaggy-dog story, however starry its elder cast."

HELEN O'HARA

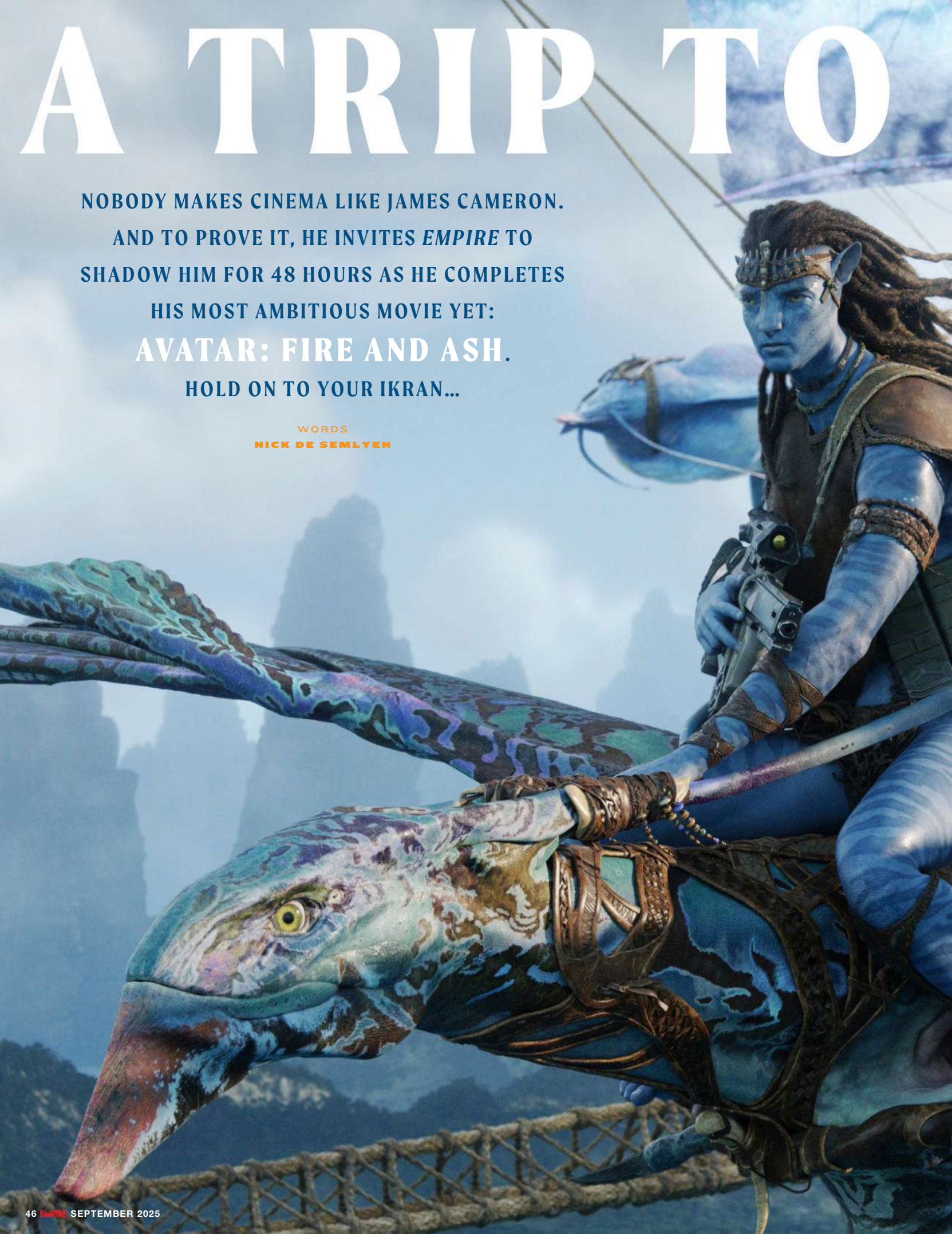
A TRIP TO

NOBODY MAKES CINEMA LIKE JAMES CAMERON. AND TO PROVE IT, HE INVITES *EMPIRE* TO SHADOW HIM FOR 48 HOURS AS HE COMPLETES HIS MOST AMBITIOUS MOVIE YET:

AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH.

HOLD ON TO YOUR IKRAN...

WORDS
NICK DE SEMLYEN



THE MOON

JAMES CAMERON'S EARS ARE BURNING.

It's a Monday morning in late June. And in Mix Theatre 2 of Park Road Post, a pristine post-production facility in Wellington, New Zealand, the most successful director in the history of Earth — standing, laser-focused, ramrod-straight — is watching the first trailer for his new movie, *Avatar: Fire And Ash*, unspool on a giant screen.

The imagery is, of course, utterly spectacular. Giant stingray-like creatures tug galleons through the air. Lizardy ikran whoosh past the camera like dragonflies. New Na'vi antagonist Varang, adorned with a bristly red headdress, hisses the climactic line, "Your goddess has no dominion *here*."

The thunderous audio, blasting out of seven big speakers on each wall, subsides. Silence settles over the room. A line of people at a long mixing desk, some of the most brilliant technical minds Hollywood has to offer, swivel to look at Cameron.

"I figured out what it is," he tells them. "The music sucks."

Being James Cameron — the most hyper-articulate, precise, non-pussyfooting director there is — this verdict is followed by three more detailed pieces of feedback.

"It's kind of funny that it's simultaneously bombastic and bland."

"It sounds like the fucking mic got stuck in a vacuum cleaner."

"I think I heard a Harrier AV-8B engine once that sounded about that differentiated."

There's laughter all round. The offending sounds, it transpires, have come from a trailer house. Composer Simon Franglen gets on the case coming up with something better. Cameron bids goodbye to the room — "Guys, you can just go back to adult activities. I don't need to know. What happens on the mixing stage stays on the mixing stage" — and turns to find some delicious-looking food laid out on a table. He's tempted. But discipline kicks in: "This stuff looks good, but I'm cleansing."

And with that he heads out of the room, fast, *Empire* scrambling to keep up. He has a world to finish building. Again.

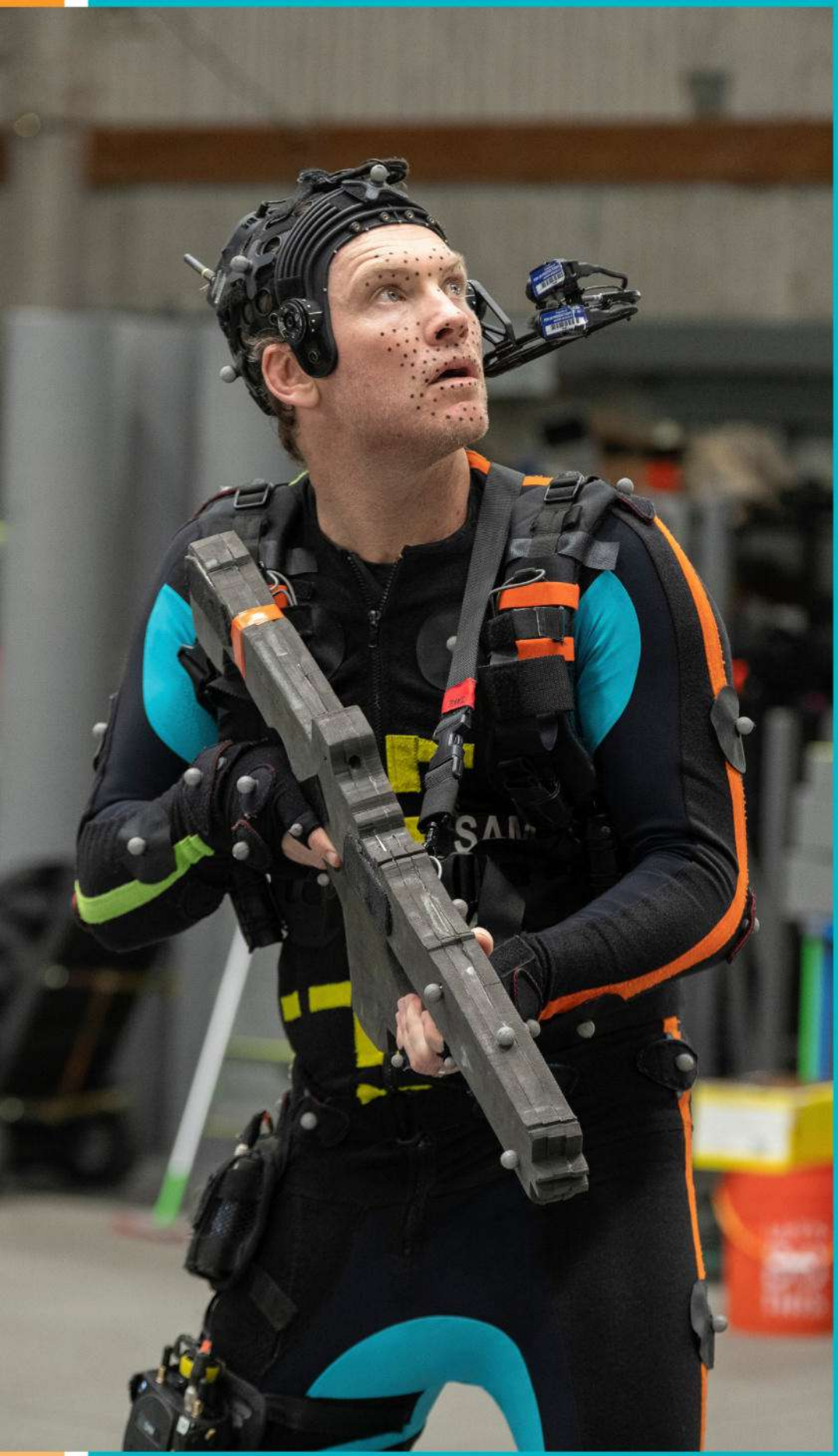
Clockwise from main: New-gen Na'vi hang out with hero tulkun Payakan; James Cameron reviews VFX shots; Varang (Oona Chaplin) in full, fearsome splendour.

These blinds are going to come down. They'll go up again in about four months."

A few minutes later, Cameron is in his personal cutting room, a sparsely decorated space down the hall. For two days, he's invited *Empire* into the nerve centre that is *Avatar* HQ, to shadow him for the official start of post-production here. Although, with a film like this, it's really been going on for years. From now until November, Cameron will spend his time bouncing between sound-mixing and visual-effects reviews. In the original *Avatar*, ex-Marine Jake Sully, toggling between bodies, mused, "Everything is backwards now, like out there is the true world, and in here is the dream." You wonder if Cameron and his post-production crew, eyeballing transmissions from Pandora all day, will soon be feeling the same.

Today, as usual, the director woke at 5am. An hour later, he was doing Filipino martial arts, sparring with a stunt guy. "In kali, there's a thing called Heaven 6; I was working on that stance this morning," he tells us. "My instructor is in LA — I trained with him when I lived there — and by Zoom he talks us through the moves. It works pretty well."

These bouts presumably alleviate some of the pressure one feels when attempting to follow up the biggest and third-biggest movies in history. Cameron also likes to let off steam by bowling. Wonderfully, he was introduced to the sport by KISS bassist Gene Simmons, whom ›



THE VETERAN

AVATAR OG SAM WORTHINGTON IS BACK AS BATTLE-TOUGHENED HERO JAKE SULLY. HE TELLS US HOW HE'S BRINGING THE BLUE THUNDER

This has been a particularly sprawling production. When were your first and last shooting days?
I think 2017 is when we first started. We did 2 and 3 concurrently. And then I did some on the stage not long ago, sometime this year. I always say we're like doctors on call. If Jim calls today, I'll get up and go.

Is it tricky to keep track of where you're at, story-wise, given the lack of traditional sets?
I've always found it very easy. I love being back in that Volume. I go onto other [projects], and whether they're big movies or big TV series, nothing compares. I always say it's the curse that Jim has given me, and it's a beautiful curse, but nothing ever compares to when I film on *Avatar*. It feels very right and safe and like home. Maybe it takes a while to warm to who Jake is and his spirit, but not much.

Do you have a process for dialling back into that spirit?
When we did the first one, I was 29 and I'd just dive into anything. That's Jake. There's no holding back; he'll do whatever is necessary with no regard for his own safety. I'm a bit older now, so it takes me a while to get that mentality. I love playing the character because of that reason. He's not as cautious or as anxious as I am in real life.

Presumably his gung-ho-ness has been diluted, though, by his gaining a family?
In the second one that was the driving force: to protect that family at all costs. That's what he found worth fighting for. Now we're in a world where it's flipped again. The peacemaker that Jake was in 2 has changed, because he's

grieving. He doesn't know how to go forward, and so he goes back to the world that he knows, which is soldiering. To attack, to go to war, that's a comforting place for Jake.

With he and Neytiri losing a child, their marriage must be under intense strain.
Yeah, that's a thing. Because of Neteyam's death, there is now a division in that relationship. That's a great design by Jim — how do you split apart the perfect love story? Jake and Neytiri share this painful wound, but they can't seem to heal each other. So they kind of split, not because they want to, but because they're just trying to survive within themselves. Jake heads back to battle and Neytiri kind of closes down. This [film] is definitely murkier. There's a lot more intensity within the family dynamic. You know, we're still seeing parts of Pandora that we haven't seen before and the beauty, but it's definitely much darker than the others.

It's always fun to watch the dynamic between Jake and Stephen Lang's Colonel Quaritch, now in a Na'vi body himself. How will we see that develop?
Well, he's that unrelenting force. He's that boil you can't lance. And they're revisiting parts from their past in their relationship going forward. It's not as simple as bad guy and good guy. They were on the same team. He's his Colonel, I'm his grunt. There's a dynamic there, especially now we're getting older, that me and Stephen can explore about what that means and who's teaching who going forward.

James Cameron and Stephen like to kickbox each other. Ever been tempted to get involved?
No way. (*Laughs*) They do that at four or five in the morning, before we start shooting. It's something Jim does to get his juices flowing. You see them when we come in: they've been doing it for several hours and they're both pumped up. They have a great relationship. But I wouldn't take them on.

As a veteran cast member, what did you make of the new additions to the cast?
When someone's in the Volume, we will come and visit. It's different to other movies, man. We have a couple of seats on the outside of the Volume and you sit down, you've got front-row seats to Oona Chaplin, front-row seats to David Thewlis. I don't understand the idea of sitting in a trailer while people of that talent are doing their job. Oona and David, they came in, it took them a microsecond to assess how we do it, and then they just played. How they pushed this, it's incredible. You're after people that are fearless in that Volume. And Jim gives you that confidence. I've always said: he raises the bar and gives you the confidence to jump over it. That's what he does.

Ethereal Wind Trader vessels fill the sky.

he met on a commercial flight between LA and New York. "That's a true bit of trivia," Cameron confirms. "We just kind of hit it off, he invited me to his birthday party, and for some reason he took me under his wing and took an hour out from all his guests to teach me how to bowl." Last summer, for his own birthday, his 70th, Cameron's wife Suzy offered to fly people over to New Zealand for a grand party. "I said, 'Let's just go bowling,'" Cameron laughs. "'Fuck it, let's get drunk and bowl.'"

Right now, though, the filmmaker does not seem to be in immediate need of stress-busting activities. He's a veteran of gnarly post-productions: on *Titanic*, he famously kept a razor blade taped to his editing computer, next to a note that said, "Use in case the film sucks." The first two *Avatars* were no picnics either, mad races to finish the eye-popping visuals in time. On *Fire And Ash*, he's in better shape. With approximately 3,600 visual-effects shots in total, over 2,000 have already been approved. "At a certain point, you put away the razor blade," he says. "I feel like we're past peak pain."

2009's *Avatar* set the scene: human Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) went rogue, escaping cruel, greedy humans to go native on the faraway moon of Pandora, falling in love with the blue, nine-foot-tall Neytiri (Zoe Saldaña). 2022's *Avatar: The Way Of Water* complicated matters, introducing a family for the star-crossed lovers, plus a new clan of aquatic aliens and talking whale-like creatures called the tulkun. *Fire And Ash*, which picks up two weeks after the events of *Way Of Water*, turns up the heat on all the heroes, setting them against a clan of brutal Na'vi called the Ash. The film, which Cameron says is morally complex, is now coming into focus. "You've been telling the movie what to be. This is where the movie tells you what it is," he explains of the editing process. "I was talking about this with Guillermo del Toro the other day. I said, 'Guillermo, doesn't it feel like there's a certain point where the movie is being *received*?' It's important to get out of the way."

A few days ago, the film played to a test audience; Cameron says it went well. "When it comes to the cards, it's like going through chicken entrails a little bit. You've got to use the Force to know what they're talking about sometimes. But they can be incredibly articulate about what's working for them, why it's working, and what pushed them over the line. We seem to have hit exactly the right tone in terms of intensity now." He's also screened *Fire And Ash* for Disney brass, including studio head Bob Iger. "It was actually the funniest one of these post-screening studio meetings I've ever had," he says. "Because some of the other executives had notes. And Bob would say, 'No, don't worry about that. I didn't feel that,' sweeping the notes aside. But look, it's good to get third-party triangulation. There's a respect there."

He seems confident. But for his grand plan to come true — an *Avatar* 4 and an *Avatar* 5, concluding the sci-fi saga exactly the way he wants — this one has to work. He's not taking anything for granted. Nothing can suck.

I like the way you're using your Oscar for a doorstop," Cameron says with a laugh.

We're over at Stone Street Studios, where VFX supervisor Eric Saindon has indeed propped open the door to his office with the award, which he won for *Way Of Water* in 2023. "It's actually the best one to use, because it takes up the smallest footprint," Cameron continues. "The fricking Saturns are too wide — you'd trip over 'em."

"I don't have great memories from Oscar night," says Saindon, "so I'm not precious about it." Turns out he was rushed to the hospital soon after being on stage, to undergo surgery for a ruptured small intestine.

Surely he'll be back, to hopefully make ›

some happier memories. The *Avatar* series' visuals are extraordinary, and over the next few hours *Empire* gets to see a lot of them, as Cameron sits with Weta's Saindon — a life-sized model of Alita from *Alita: Battle Angel* beside them, weaponry from the *Lord Of The Rings* movies adorning the wall — then ILM's Nigel Sumner in an adjacent office. The shots are dazzlingly vibrant, stunningly lifelike... and often not quite right. Cameron has created every biome on Pandora — every twig, every fish — and has a maker's instinct for when something's amiss.

On a kuru, the neural link that extends from the back of a Na'vi's head: "Okay, so this looks like a handful of furry caterpillars. It's not what these things are supposed to look like. It's supposed to be a delicate interface. It's the first time we're going to see one in the movie, and it's kind of *gross*. I mean, some people think they're gross regardless."

On an eye, belonging to new tulkun character the Matriarch: "She's got that kind of elephant-wrinkle effect around here. It's cool, right? There's some ancient wisdom there. Her secondary eye looks pretty dead. You might have to displace the eyeball to the left just a tiny bit, because I don't believe this eye can see anything."

On Jake's tail: "Right now it's just languid. It's very neutral. You see it in his face — the tension in his jaw as he's hearing what's being said, but he's trying to keep cool, right? He even does a little sort of jaw-thrust there. I think the tail should be doing the same thing. I mean, these guys can't lie. They can't hide what they're feeling."

Top left and right: Neytiri (Zoe Saldaña) and Varang wield bows. **Above:** New character Peylak (David Thewlis).

In a later session, unhappy with the rotor wash that's been created beneath a futuristic airship, Cameron grabs a pencil and paper and sketches out a diagram to make his case. Suddenly, we're in a seminar on advanced aerodynamics. "There's a point where the air flow immediately under the fans hits a velocity where it starts to atomise the water. But they've got to get the primary effect right. In the simplest possible terms, it's an upside-

"EVERYBODY IN THIS MOVIE IS REACTING FROM A PLACE OF TRAUMA."

JAMES CAMERON

Left: Peylak's Wind Trader caravan crosses a Pandoran ocean. **Below left:** Cameron demos his virtual-camera system, while *Empire* attempts not to break anything.

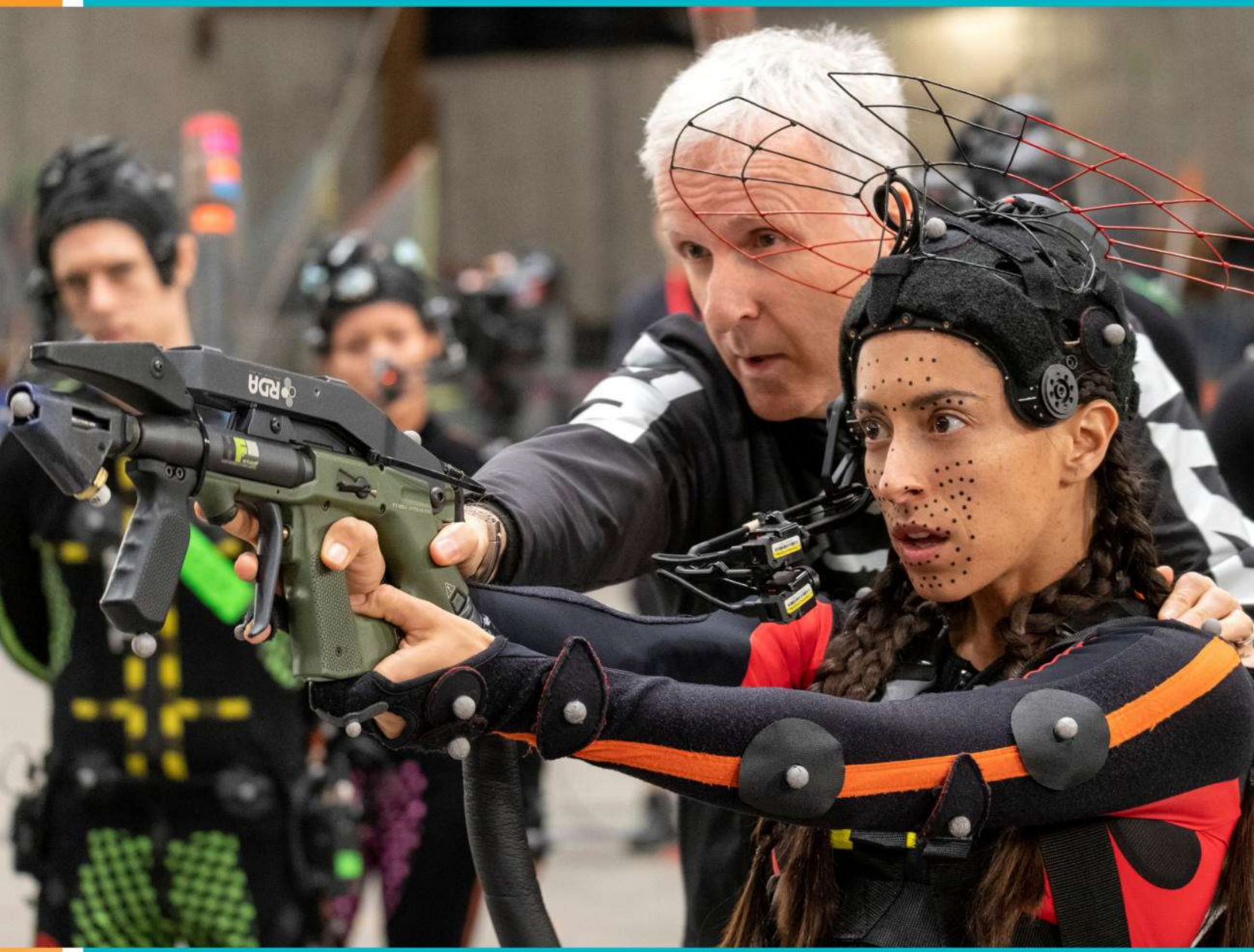
down mushroom cloud, right?" He leans back in his chair. "I fly helicopters, so I think about this shit."

He's in his element — as if he's ever *not* in his element — dispensing tech-heavy analysis, peppered with drily delivered asides such as, "Continuity is for wimps," or, "It's ten times better than it was, and it's half of what it should be." But for every few volleys of critique, there's something he sees that delights him, prompting him to announce the acronym every VFX supervisor wants to hear — "FLF", or First Look Final.

"Aw, that's gorgeous," he lauds, seeing a tulkun and her calf gliding through clear ocean water. Observing a mass of feral Ash warriors, he remarks, grinning, "They're all hopped up on Kickapoo Joy Juice."

A few times during VFX review, Cameron punches up "reference", footage of the actors performing the scene years ago back on the performance-capture stage, or 'Volume'. That way, he can check exactly what they did on the day against the final, blued-up result.

The first two *Avatar* movies made more money than God — or Eywa — but Cameron is concerned that the work of the cast still isn't being fully appreciated. Some people still view them as animated movies, a fact that drives the director a bit nuts. "The number of times in newspapers they talk about Sigourney Weaver and Kate Winslet *voicing* their characters... It's like, yeah, and Russell Crowe voiced a character in *Gladiator*. He also showed up for 12 months of photography!" He's even talked the Directors Guild of America through the process, but was dissatisfied with the results. "I don't think it was attended by anybody that actually voted, because it didn't seem to have any effect," he says. "You don't want to give us an award? Fine, whatever. That's not why we do it. But I think ›



THE FIRESTARTER

TROUBLE'S COMING TO PANDORA, IN THE FORM OF VOLCANO-TEMPERED NA'VI VARANG. WHO, AS **OONA CHAPLIN** REVEALS, IS ALSO INTO SLIPKNOT

James Cameron told us that seeing Varang come to life has been his big joy on this film. How has it been for you?
It's a dream come true in so many different ways. The first *Avatar* is so dear to my heart. Just beautiful, heartwarming, connecting to nature, connecting to the blue people, the victory of everything that's good against everything that's bad... It's one of my favourite films of all time. Getting to be a part of that, then getting to be a part of a family of people — it's such a crew. And then on top of that, you're in a place where all of the weird physical things that I've always wanted to do with my body, with a performance, I get to do them.

Including riding a giant creature called the Nightwraith?
I enjoyed riding the beast. (*Laughs*) It definitely works your legs. It's fun, especially after having been to the Disney World thing that they've done with *Avatar*. I knew I had a bunch of riding to do, and [theme-park ride Flight Of Passage] really helped me get into the spirit. I've spent so much of my career in a corset, [so] the freedom of being able to express a character using all of my limbs... it was really fun to work out.

Varang and her Ash Clan are Na'vi, but more shadowy ones than we've seen before.
Well, they have a bunch of unresolved trauma. They got hit by a natural disaster and what

Varang did was say, "Well, fuck Eywa." She basically goes towards a different power, and tries to harness that, and in so doing kind of raises her people out of misery. It's easy to fall into the villain mentality, but actually she's the hero of her people. Because she's saved them out of misery and starvation and begging.

Did you socialise much with the rest of the cast, or try to stay in Varang mode?
I think Varang took over me a little bit. I was in a really weird headspace at the time. Because I went in and I kind of covered my whole trailer with very vivid and disturbing images of the kind of trauma that Varang would have gone through. I didn't realise that I was playing with fire at the time, but she did seep into my psyche a little more than I had anticipated. (*Laughs*) It was okay. I didn't rip anybody's head off. It's fine.

Is music part of your process? Is there a Varang playlist?
Yeah, I got really into throat-singing with Varang, and I got really into Slipknot. I'd never really gone into death metal, and probably Slipknot is laughable to some people: "Oh, that's so mild." But it was pretty hardcore for me. I do have a playlist for her. And I would ease into that space, because death metal and heavy metal was still a little bit too far a stretch for me to connect with. So I would listen to a lot of Pow Wow (*Native American music traditionally played at social gatherings*). The drum, just very soulful and strong, and warrior cries, you know? I'd listen to a lot of that going into work. And try and sing along in LA traffic. (*Laughs*)

James Cameron didn't know this until after you got the role, but you also have connections to indigenous people yourself, right?
My grandmother was a Mapuche Maya Chilean woman. She kind of had that brainwashed out of her, but, I mean, you look at her, she was a squat little Indian lady. There was a moment in my twenties where I started becoming very curious about what that meant. And it took me on a whole journey. We do a lot of fundraising for indigenous-led projects and Land Back projects and things like this. I ended up falling into a network of a lot of really cool elders, people that are extremely just down-home and very wise and very different. [On *Fire And Ash*] we got to bring in a couple of our relatives, our people, from the Yawanawá, from the Amazon. And that was a trip.

By all accounts it was a memorable day.
Yeah, they sang and blew on everybody and prayed for everybody. Everybody from Kate Winslet and Jim Cameron, all the way down to the guy that takes out the trash, everybody got a blessing.

Varang takes a break from wreaking mayhem. For now.

there's a point where the good work of the actors is not being acknowledged. It's seen as a second-tier approach to acting, when I think it's a more pure form than photographic acting. There's nothing sacred about a camera and a lens and a piece of film, you know? But they act like it is."

He likes to say that the performances in *Avatar* are not just 100 per cent truthful to what the actors did, but 110 per cent — because the added tails and twitching ears accentuate the emotions. Two HD cameras on a head-rig capture every tiny nuance of the actors' expressions: by now, the system, and Cameron, know the minutest ins and outs of Sam Worthington and Zoe Saldaña's facial musculature. There's what Cameron calls Worthington's "swallowed-a-bug" look: "This is Sam wrestling with a problem; it's how he externalises." And there's Saldaña's weepy-face: "Her lips go through all these really interesting deformations that aren't how the average person's mouth operates."

All of this is evident in the final product, with ever-increasing fidelity as the tech improves. And the process, as Cameron shoots scenes with the cast well before working out the cinematography, lets him concentrate entirely on the performances. It's a world away from the madness that was shooting *Titanic*: "The wind's coming up, our lighting balloons are moving, and the crane and the lifeboat davits and the crowd and all that. Oh, and by the way, Kate and Leo are doing their lines. If you take all that away, there's a pure connection between the director and the actors that's unbroken."

He's most excited about what new cast member Oona Chaplin has delivered as Varang, the Ash leader with a taste for human weaponry. She's not quite Cameron's first female villain since the Alien Queen — there was Tia Carrere in *True Lies*, he points out — but promises to be up there with the Xeno-mama in terms of raw malevolence. "She was up against two actresses that I really, really admired," says the director of Chaplin. "If I told you their names, you'd say, 'Cast her.' But there was something about Oona. She was in many ways my lowest-maintenance person. She just took care of her own performance — I didn't want to mess with it — and she brought a whole other layer to it, around plant medicine and indigenous shamanic practice and so on."

In fact, Chaplin was responsible for the most momentous day of the production, when she brought two shamans from the deep Amazon rainforest on set. "We were going to do a blessing ceremony for the production," says Cameron. "It was supposed to take 15 minutes — it took five hours. Because everybody wanted in on it. They blessed every fucking person in the building."

Still, over 15 years on, nobody else is making movies like *Avatar*. Who would dare try? It's mind-bogglingly complex, beyond state-of-the-art, and unlike Marvel or *Star Wars*, it's all overseen by one person. Over his two days with *Empire*, James Cameron repeatedly makes our head spin, showing us the secrets of his process. On E Stage at Stone Street Studios, he demos his virtual-camera rig, which transforms the unassuming room into the bleak Ash Village, heaving with Na'vi, allowing him to shoot a pre-existing scene — in this case, Varang parlaying with another character — any way he likes. With a quick command to the 'Brain Bar', a group of boffins behind computer consoles, he can transform himself into a camera crane, or a helicopter, whatever he likes. "If I want to move the sun, I move the sun," he says, a benevolent creator. "It takes them about a half-hour to turn day into night."

Jack Champion, as human Spider, had to perform scenes twice, once with his fellow actors and once with crew replicating character movements at actual Na'vi scale (small monitors atop towering puppets show the faces of ›

Mark Fellman, Lou Hatton

Sigourney Weaver et al, reciting their lines, so he could react to them). A surreal process if ever there was one, it was Champion's first-ever experience making a movie. "He did his next film in Germany," remembers Cameron, "and he called me from there and said, 'It's so different!' I said, 'Yeah, I know. That's called real movies.'"

The result, mainlined into audiences' eyeballs in crystal-sharp 3D, feels like nothing else: a hyper-vivid waking dream. One test-screening note has particularly pleased Cameron: "An *Avatar* movie is like the carnival coming to town." The director smiles: "I thought, 'That's *it*.'"

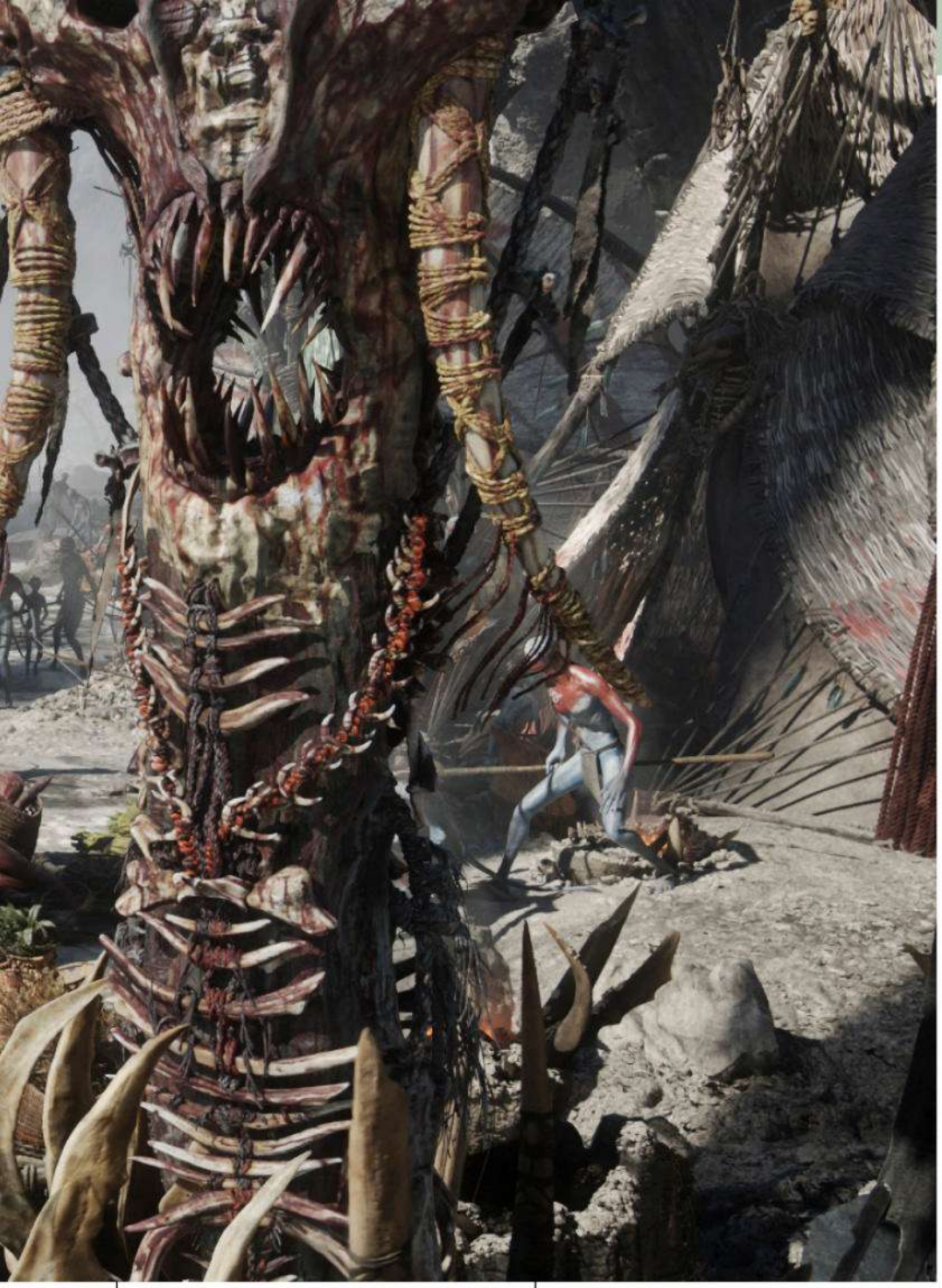
He has distractions, things pulling him away from Pandora. His ongoing explorations of the world's uncharted crannies, for one. Other movie projects, for another. He's set to write and direct the nuclear-war-themed *Ghosts Of Hiroshima*. And he recently snapped up the rights for Joe Abercrombie's fantasy novel *The Devils*, a raucous tale of magical beings sent on an impossible mission. "It's nuts. The whole thing is off its tits," says Cameron, who particularly likes the insanely violent character Vigga, a werewolf. "It doesn't have the kind of conscience that *Avatar* does, but I don't know if that's a bad thing. [*Hiroshima*] is a movie you do because you have to. *The Devils* is a movie you do for fun. I was literally reading parts of the book out loud to my wife Suzy. And it dawned on me: 'I like this book so much, I should just buy it.'"

"[THE ASH CLAN] ARE ALL HOPPED UP ON KICKAPOO JOY JUICE."

JAMES CAMERON

But the Na'vi still consume him. He reveals to *Empire* that he hopes to create an animated anthology series, à la *Love, Death + Robots* and *Secret Level*, filling in slivers of *Avatar* lore. "You know, backstory on characters and tangential stuff that happened off-camera within the movies. Who first landed on Pandora? The first expedition. You could go anywhere you want." And despite internet rumours, he has no plans to hand the next two *Avatar* movies, if they get made, onto anyone else.

The cast have read "95 per cent" of the scripts for 4 and 5. What they have not been



Left: The Ash Village, a place that bristles with ominous totems and weaponry. And not much in the way of day spas. **Below:** Composer Simon Franglen at work.

allowed to read, Cameron says, are the final scenes of the saga: "Only Jon Landau and I know the ending."

Tragically, Landau — Cameron's producer and close friend since the '90s, and a consummate hype-man for the *Avatar* series who signed off emails with "Sivako", Na'vi for "rise to the challenge" — died of cancer last July, aged 63. The director still occasionally refers to him in the present tense, and it's clear upon visiting *Avatar* HQ that Landau's spirit very much lives on. "His name is still everywhere," says producer Brigitte Yorke. "It's on the call sheets. It's on his office — we still call it Jon's office. Our internal phone list. He's not going anywhere."

"The tears were flowing from the cast when Jon died," says Cameron. "Man, it hit everybody pretty hard. We worked together for 32 years, and the thing about Jon was that he always had an opinion, he never pressed it, and never sulked if I didn't agree. He and I were great partners."

He considers Landau irreplaceable, but one of the people he's elevated to fill the vacuum is Jon's son, Jamie, who has long been part of the *Avatar* family. As producer he remains at Cameron's side, tapping into what he calls his "Jimtuition", dealing with everything from merchandise to the virtual-camera stage. A veteran of acting classes, Landau will also be visible in *Fire And Ash*, twice — as both a human weapons officer and a Na'vi Wind Trader. "The guy who's at the bow of the gondola, who blows the horn and has the ribbons hanging," he beams. "That's me."

Tough emotions are at the core of "A3". "Everybody in this movie is reacting from a place of trauma," explains Cameron. "Everybody. Jake's processing the death of his son. Lo'ak is processing the death of his brother and his own guilt around that. I think if you're authentic about life and emotion and relationships, it doesn't matter how crazy your world-building is. I'm on a flying fish — but I believe that flying fish. It's a pretty fucking good flying fish."

The director has a self-imposed rule: while he spends each day poring over fragments, he is only letting himself watch the full film five times, so he can cling onto a shred of objectivity. He's also adopted an ingenious hack — known as a "flop" — in which he flips the screen horizontally (subtitles excluded) so he can watch it as a mirror image, breaking his neural patterning and keeping the experience fresh.

And while he waves away any mention of people getting depressed after leaving Pandora — "Go to the park"— his aim is very much to make people sob with *Fire And Ash*. After all, it makes *him* tear up. "There's a scene I can't really talk about... it's rough. It makes me cry every time I watch the film. I'm crying at my own damn movie. But if I'm not in tune with my film, then I got no business being here."

Over two days at the director's side, one thing is made abundantly clear — he's so in tune with his film, it's a surprise he doesn't whip out a kuru and plug it into the Avid. Every skimwing splash, every ikran roar, every flamethrower blast is precisely as he wants it.

And so, finally, is that troublesome music in Mix Theatre 2. Just as *Empire* prepares to bid goodbye to Pandora, the doors to the chamber are thrown open and Cameron strides out, like a father who's just welcomed a newborn child. "We got ourselves a trailer," he tells us with a hard-won smile. Then he darts off, down the corridor, locking onto the next challenge.

The carnival is on its way.

AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH IS IN CINEMAS FROM 19 DECEMBER

WITH ITS BONE-CRUNCHING INJURIES AND MALEVOLENT FORCES, DIRECTOR JUSTIN TIPPING'S **HIM** BRINGS HORROR TO AMERICAN FOOTBALL. GAME ON…

WORDS **AMON WARMANN**

BLOOD SPORT

HOW MUCH ARE YOU WILLING TO SACRIFICE TO BE GREAT?

It's a question that cinema has tackled time and time again. With musicians. With actors. And with athletes. But with *HIM*, the answers could be darker and more unsettling than ever before, resulting in something its director thinks might be wholly new.

"I was an athlete my entire life. My first word was 'ball'," says Justin Tipping. "About halfway through playing soccer in college, I gave it up and started pursuing film. That was my new love. So I have this love of sports as well as the inner-workings of the psychology of athletes, and I'm a cinephile. I thought it was exciting to take on a film that was giving the promise of a sports drama, but at the same time delivering horror."

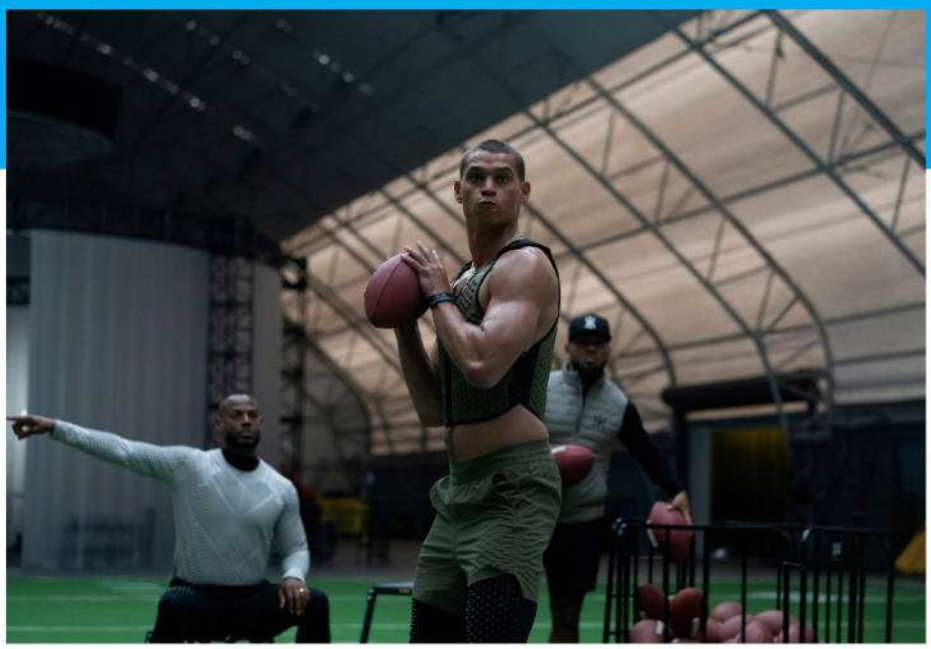
That sentiment is shared by Jordan Peele, no stranger to mixing things up himself: in *Get Out*, he merged horror with satire and awkward social-comedy, while *Nope* meshes sci-fi, horror and Westerns. In 2022, he plucked Zack Akers and Skip Bronkie's screenplay — then titled 'GOAT' — from The Black List's best-unproduced-scripts catalogue, for his production company, and he's since been championing it every step of the way.

"At Monkeypaw, we love ideas that shouldn't be made and that we're not supposed to touch, and the combination of sports and horror was something I had never quite seen," says Peele, who stepped up to produce the film. "It was just clear that we had a genre mash-up that was right up my alley."

Tipping's own history made him the perfect choice to bring *HIM* to life. After making a promising 2016 debut with gritty crime-drama *Kicks*, he's painting on a bigger, more ambitious canvas. His second feature follows Cameron Cade (Tyriq Withers), a promising American-football player who gets invited to the training compound of his idol — legendary quarterback Isaiah White (Marlon Wayans) — to learn exactly what's required to become great. But what begins as a fruitful mentor and mentee relationship soon turns disturbingly sour, as it becomes clear that Isaiah may not be the role model Cameron thought he was.

"My instinct was to set it up in a way that it feels like we're in *Friday Night Lights*, or a Gatorade or Nike ad," says Tipping. "We're rooting for the kid who just needs to unlock one thing to take it to the next level. And then we subvert the expectations and let it become *Nosferatu* or *Ex Machina*, and let it evolve or devolve — depending on your sensibilities — into something it's not."

Assembled by a combination of up-and-



Clockwise from main: The future GOAT? Cameron Cade (Tyriq Withers); Mentor Isaiah White (Marlon Wayans) gives pointers; Purple patch; Julia Fox plays Isaiah's wife Elsie; Pumped up; Director Justin Tipping, Withers, producer Jordan Peele and Wayans.

comers and veteran artists, *HIM* looks to push the limits — of sports, horror, and more — in order to be the greatest version of itself.

FITTINGLY, THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF Tipping and Peele's first encounter mirror the story of *HIM*: a young upstart meeting a fellow artist at the top of their game.

"He actually saw my tiny indie [*Kicks*], and he had won the Academy Award [for *Get Out*] around the same time, and just started Monkeypaw," Tipping recalls. "So he's meeting young filmmakers, and he brought me in, and that was pretty surreal. It was like, 'We should find something [to work on together] at some point.' And then they thought of me when this came around."

Tipping quickly set about making the story his own, expanding on the screenplay by drawing on his personal experience and leaning into the rich themes at play. "The studio and everyone involved wanted to go bigger," he says. "My first conversations with the guys [at Monkeypaw] were about the psychology of what it takes to be the greatest of all time, and what that looks like

set in the world of American football. And once I started leaning into some of my favourite horror — which would be more in the vein of a *Jacob's Ladder* — the creative floodgates just opened."

That psychology is expressed through Withers and Wayans' characters. As the film begins, Isaiah is a football icon who is considering retirement. At first, he sees Cameron as a viable replacement to mould in his image. But it soon becomes clear that he's not as willing to give up the reins of power and stardom as he initially thought.

"It was multifaceted," says Wayans of his own role. "I didn't want to be one of those performances that was just, 'Oh, I'm the bad guy.' At first, I really want to help this kid out, right? I really want to take these jewels and pass them on. But then jealousy and envy is the monster, and it twists your intention. And so that's what happens to him; as he's trying to let go of something, he realises he wants to hold on. And this kid is in my way, so he has to go."

For as much fun as Wayans was having, he was also required to dig deep into Isaiah's dark psyche during a difficult personal time. But the excavation reaped rewards. "My mother and father had passed, and I just was at this low point in life when I went to go do this movie," he remembers. "I dove in this dark, murky lake to try and find this character. And while I was down there swimming, I found the character and I grabbed his hand. When I looked up, I saw me floating upside down in the water — severely broken — and I said, 'No, I'm gonna get that guy — Marlon — and I'm gonna go resuscitate him and make him the best version of himself.' And from that moment on, the movie was a cathartic experience for me."

For Peele, Wayans' performance serves as a welcome reminder of the actor's versatility. "He's developed such a fanbase in his comedy. But for years, whenever [his name] comes up in my circles, it's always [been] like, 'Yeah, but remember when he did *Requiem* [*For A Dream*]?'", Peele enthuses. "And so this is the full-circle moment of that notion, where you see him in this and you realise, 'Oh my God, this is one of our great dramatic actors as well.' He's able to tap into what is funny and exciting and unpredictable in his comedic talents, but as a force of menace and as a character of awe and wonder, he just holds it so well."

Withers — a multi-talented athlete who played association football before he started playing American football, and an actor who, in terms of on-screen intensity, Peele likens to Keanu Reeves — was all too happy to soak up every bit of knowledge Wayans had to offer from his years in the business. "Marlon's been in this Hollywood game for decades," says Withers. "I knew he was going to come to set, take me under his wing, and really just speak to me with the uncle-isms. And I yearn for that brotherhood." But what was true in real life was the exact opposite on screen.

"I'm a nurturer, so Tyriq is coming up and I'm like, 'Hey bro, how are you spending your money?' I'm giving him all these jewels," says Wayans. "So all the good experiences we have as Marlon and Tyriq, when we go to our characters, I get to twist it. I get to go dark. ›

I get to go: 'What if my intentions weren't good?'"

The tense dynamic between Isaiah and Cameron is reminiscent of the near-abusive relationship at the heart of Damien Chazelle's *Whiplash*. As much as both escalate to excruciating levels, however, there is one clear difference between Chazelle's masterpiece and *HIM* — only one of them is a true horror.

"J.K. Simmons was playing a complex character and he's a daunting menace [in *Whiplash*]," says Peele. "But I have to have at least one moment that chills me to my bones. And the horror fans will be delighted with some of these sequences in this film. There's some stuff you've just never seen before."

IT'S JUNE 2025, AND *EMPIRE* IS SEEING skeletons. Watching some footage from *HIM*, during a pivotal football practice scene (an extended version of a scene glimpsed in the trailer), an amped-up Cameron lands a brutal tackle, sending the screen into X-ray mode at the point of impact. It's a striking visual flourish that was inspired by Tipping's own personal horror story.

"I've herniated three discs in my neck [as an athlete]," he says. "When I had to get my MRI, there was a fluke power-outage in LA. Halfway through the session, the power went out, and I had to sit there in darkness in the machine, strapped down, for ten minutes."

As such, Tipping's idea to visualise the bone-breaking in the film brings the extreme wear and tear of physical competition to the fore. "The pain that's felt when you're cramping or you pull a hamstring... because it's not visible to everyone else, no-one really understands what that internal pain is like," he explains. "Just because they can't see it, doesn't mean it's not real. And so the X-ray was also a way of showing what is actually happening inside the body. It felt like it was hitting that Venn diagram of sports horror."

In addition to his own experience, Tipping pulled valuable notes from other athletes. "I was also able to talk to people like Ricky Williams — a former NFL running back — and some players, and get all of their insight. And I grew up with friends that played football professionally. It takes a toll on your body. It's collisions, and it's like getting in a car wreck every weekend and then trying to get yourself ready to get into another car wreck the next weekend."

When it comes to unsettling imagery, skeletal outlines are the tip of *HIM*'s iceberg. As Cameron is drawn further into Isaiah's world, the horror elements bubble up. The trailer alone teases disturbing face masks, training sessions that leave its participants bloody and mangled, and adoring fans who have turned into cult-like worshippers. *HIM* is heavy on religious imagery.

"In American football, one of the most common sayings that everyone knows from every Super Bowl is 'God. Family. Football'," says Tipping. "So it felt like, given the sandbox we were in with horror, it was also just another way to thematically hit that — God, family, football, America, and horror all at once. And [as in religion], there are similar themes of sacrifice, as well as who the chosen one is."

HIM looks to position Cameron as the chosen one. One key scene that *Empire* is shown is bookended by the young star taking Jesus' position in a painting of the Last Supper. Another sees him making a Christ-like pose on the field, as if being crucified on a cross. Just what exactly is going on here?

"I'm sort of being twisty with my answer," says Peele, who — along with Tipping — prefers not to dig into specifics. "But tracing American football to British football to Shrovetide, and even before that to pagan sports and rituals, there really is this

Clockwise from main: Not your average mascot; Not your average training session; There will be blood; The roar of the crowd...; Wayans, Tipping and Withers on set; Cameron and Isaiah train with Malek (Maurice Greene).

deep history of why we do this — why we enact war — that has to do with these ancient festivals connecting to our sins, our penance and fertility."

That America's favourite pastime is entangled in such a messy history is one of many reasons why it's the perfect incubator for all of *HIM*'s themes and scares. "It's a violent game, and so when I started leaning into history and unpacking that, it created this setting for horror, and my visual approach to it was just, well, how far can we push it until we've gone too far?" says Tipping. "And, as it turns out, you can push it pretty far." Peele concurs. "One of my favourite things Justin brings is a sort of understanding of how the pop aesthetic of how we commercialise our sports can be subverted into something eerie and something creepy."

It's also a showcase of Tipping's growth and maturity as a filmmaker. "*Kicks* was talking about commodity fetishism, and if we covet the thing, like the shoe, how it becomes our personhood," he says. "And what [*HIM*] really at its core is exploring is the commodification of the athlete. I think it will resonate with people because it's also true of artists, musicians, and anyone who's asked if their job is worth it."

Indeed, *HIM* stretches far beyond an American football field.

HOW MUCH ARE YOU WILLING TO sacrifice to be great?

As Cameron considers the lengths he must go to in order to emulate his idol and become the best American football player in the land, the question reverberates. And even if you're not a quarterback, that desire is familiar. "We all know what it feels like to want to be the best," says Withers. "It's not just about football or athletes. It's really about people who are willing to sacrifice and to put things that their body or their mind desires aside because they know they have an end goal."

Peele elaborates on the theme. "Sports is kind of like Barbie; you hate it or you love it," he says. "Justin's vision is a movie for both sets. If you love sports, this movie is for you. If you don't, then this movie really addresses part of your perspective as well."

Meanwhile, the mentor-mentee relationships behind the camera evolved as the production went on. "It was surreal because he's a GOAT, and someone I look up to and admire," says Tipping of Peele. "It was really amazing to turn a script with him and see how his mind works versus mine, because it's a true collaboration. I'd push it one way, and then we could 'yes and' each other."

"It's funny — we never talked about ourselves as Cameron and Isaiah, but I suppose we could be," says Peele. "Watching Justin go through this movie was certainly watching a man on an adventure and a journey. I had some good guidance when I was making *Get Out*, and I tried to mirror that. I'm thrilled to have been a part of his film."

And the result is something that may well provoke deep discussions when the credits roll. "What I love about this film is it's not preachy. It's not something that comes with a message. It has a lot of truths you haven't thought about," says Peele. "At Monkeypaw, we believe that our role is to present a perspective and a story that no-one has ever seen before."

Now that has the makings of greatness.

***HIM* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 19 SEPTEMBER**

BACK for ELEVENSES

WORDS ALEX GODFREY

SPINAL TAP'S SEMINAL 1984 DOCUMENTARY WAS A HEAVY-METAL MASTERPIECE. NOW, AS THE HAPLESS TRIO RETURN WITH SPINAL TAP II: THE END CONTINUES, WE MEET THEM TO DISCUSS THEIR COMBUSTIBLE CHEMISTRY

When we first met them, Spinal Tap were suffering implosion and, in the case of one of their drummers, explosion. Our three axe-wielding heroes: David St. Hubbins, Nigel Tufnel and Derek Smalls, a British band who'd been going in various guises since the 1960s, assuming their final form in the 1970s as they embraced the majesty of rock. There were controversial albums (*Intravenus de Milo*, *Shark Sandwich*) and seminal songs ('Big Bottom', 'Stonehenge', 'Sex Farm'). Director Marty DiBergi's 1984 film, though, chronicled the disastrous release of their 1982 record *Smell The Glove* and its catastrophic promotional tour, in which they failed to break America. In fact, America broke them.

Unfortunately for them, DiBergi captured it all, presenting them as they got lost backstage, wrestled with malfunctioning props and fell out with — and sometimes over — each other. The band did not like it, deeming it, well, a shit sandwich. Still, on they went, releasing albums in 1992 (*Break Like The Wind*) and 2009 (*Back From The Dead*), reuniting for shows here and there. And now, they've reunited with DiBergi himself. With their former manager Ian Faith having recently passed away, it transpired that they were contractually obliged to play one more show, and so DiBergi is once more behind the camera to document the metal mayhem. And, thanks to collaborations with the likes of Paul McCartney and Elton John, it looks set to be one hell of a last hurrah.

At the end of June, we spent an hour on Zoom with all of them: St. Hubbins, Tufnel, Smalls *and* DiBergi (or, at least, their mysterious counterparts Michael McKean, Christopher Guest, Harry Shearer and Rob Reiner), unpacking their unique history and opening old wounds. Emotions, it's fair to say, went up to 11.

Let me begin by passing on my condolences. Your former manager, Ian Faith, has died.
David St. Hubbins: Oh yeah. In the ground.
Derek Smalls: I don't think "condolences" is the proper word, I think "congratulations".
Nigel Tufnel: I say good riddance, is what I say.
St. Hubbins: It was a strained relationship. Mostly, he was the strain. So when we said goodbye, it was just, "Off you go."

Did you go to the funeral?
Tufnel: No — why would we have gone to the funeral? No.
Smalls: I thought going in a white suit to Ian's funeral would be the right thing to do, but I didn't go.
Tufnel: I thought not going was a way to express how I felt.
St. Hubbins: To express my indifference I stayed home.

Yes, I thought you might have mixed feelings. Although it doesn't sound like

Clockwise from main: Three legends — Derek Smalls (Harry Shearer), David St. Hubbins (Michael McKean) and Nigel Tufnel (Christopher Guest) — plus Paul McCartney enjoy a sing-along; The Tap with Marty DiBergi (Rob Reiner); Performing with Elton John; Who are you calling cheesy?

you do.
Tufnel: Not mixed at all, no.
St. Hubbins: Straight up. No chaser.

Let's talk about the new film. Marty, how did you feel about working with Spinal Tap again? You had a rocky history with them...
Marty DiBergi: Yeah, I did. When they first saw the first film, they called it a hatchet job.
Smalls: It *was* a hatchet job.
DiBergi: Yeah, they felt that I focused too much on all the mishaps and not enough of the triumphs. Listen, I love the band, I've always loved the band, right back from the days when I saw them at the Electric Banana. And I still have these strong feelings for them, so I just hope that they like the second film better than they disliked the first one.
St. Hubbins: I must say that there was never any doubt about your good intentions, even during the first years in the '80s. I had no doubt that you were a fan, that you wanted to be a friend and all that. But I think that for sensationalism's sake, you went for the darker stuff, and it played out as fairly embarrassing to us. [Afterwards] when you met with each of us individually, Nigel and Derek and myself each threw a beverage in your face, first thing, before speaking at all, which shows a certain amount of solidarity about our feelings. But even so, now I feel very solidly that we're all in the same corner.
DiBergi: Well, I hope that after you watch this film, you won't be holding any beverages in your hands.
Smalls: Or grudges.
St. Hubbins: Make that a ground rule. No grudges, no beverages.

David, what made you so optimistic that Marty wouldn't betray you this time?
St. Hubbins: I'm a bit of an optimist, I must say, I think the glass is half full. It's not completely clean — but it's half full.
Smalls: But he believes in the existence of the glass to start with.

I don't want to make things any more awkward than they already are. But-
St. Hubbins: Well, you're doing just that, Alex. I'm sorry, you're making it extremely awkward. Not awkward like watching-porn-with-mum awkward, but awkward enough. But continue.

I should never have bought this up. Forgive me.
St. Hubbins: Well, it's a bit late now, Alex, if you don't mind me saying so.
Tufnel: Alex, it's not your fault.
St. Hubbins: It *is* his fault. It *is* his fault.
Tufnel: Well, it is, it is, you're right. It is, yeah.
DiBergi: Has anybody ever accused you of being a muckraker?

Just once. A pretty good hit-rate, I think.
St. Hubbins: Alright. Someone's got to rake the muck, though. The muck is not going to rake itself. Put it that way. ›

Clockwise from left: "This one goes out to all the sex farmers"; Using all the mod cons; Britrock; Too much fucking perspective; Spinal Tap get horny.

Let's move on from personal disagreements. Spinal Tap, what are your thoughts on Marty's original film as part of your legacy?
Tufnel: Well, it was awful seeing it, because it made us look bad. Obviously. It made us look like fools, you know. But then, some people thought it was good. It made us known, I suppose.
Smalls: I think it proved that there's a great audience for fools.
DiBergi: The Beatles talked about 'The Fool On The Hill', who was much wiser than many others. And so you can look at it that way. Even if you're made the fool, you could be the fool on the hill.
Smalls: If there were a hill.

Are you happier people these days?
Tufnel: We each have a different view of how we do what we do. Mine is more personal, coming more from my personal experiences in the last 15 years. Moira, my partner, has influenced me in many ways. I wouldn't have written a song about personal love 15 years ago.

You've grown as a person.
Tufnel: Well, I don't know, have I?
Smalls: You're the same height.
Tufnel: Yeah. You could ask Moira. She would know, because we've been together for a bit.
St. Hubbins: If she stayed the same size and you grew then she'd *really* notice.
DiBergi: I think we've all shrunk a little bit.
St. Hubbins: I'm at least an inch shorter than I was.

What about musically? How do you think Spinal Tap fits into the whole landscape these days?
Tufnel: What's the landscape?
St. Hubbins: Yeah, and do we belong there at all? I mean, I've got plenty of landscape right here where I'm sitting, and I don't need any more. In fact, there's a man working on my landscaping right now. I can see him through the window.
DiBergi: Is he legal? Is he legally in America?
St. Hubbins: Don't ask, don't tell.
Tufnel: Alex, what is the scene today? What would you describe as the scene?

Well, back when you were at your height, music was more tribal, and you had your rock bands and your hip-hop and metal, etc. Since then, things have fused, in some ways.
Tufnel: You say it's tribal, I think it was more treble, actually, because you had to do stuff that cut through.
Smalls: Trouble?
Tufnel: Treble, treble. Because when you're mixing, if it's all low-end, it doesn't cut through, it doesn't make an impression. We just do what we do, and we don't want to be considered any specific sort of thing.
Smalls: Except loud. I think we stand as representatives of volume.
St. Hubbins: We're not a death-metal band. Even though thematically, we do go there from time to time. But having a big, loud song go off in your face like a neutron bomb, it should be a positive thing. And if the lyrics are saying, "Come on, let's all die and meet Satan face to face," that's just part of the fun. I really think it's the size of the music, the depth of the music, and the depth that you bring to the music. It's one of those, "I looked into the abyss, the abyss looked into me" kind of things. And it's a joyful noise to me.

What do you think the abyss saw when it looked into you?
St. Hubbins: Probably reruns of *Leave It To Beaver*. I've been watching a lot of old TV.

Culturally and socially, times have altered quite radically since you've been gone. Has that changed things for you as a band at all? How does performing the likes of 'Big Bottom' go down these days?
St. Hubbins: Well, the last time we were playing, we geared up to play 'Bitch School', and there was a woman working on the film, one of your crew, Marty, who refused to listen. She did the switches and everything, and then she put her fingers in her ears so she couldn't hear us sing about Bitch School. We didn't see that in the old days. And it's fine, I get it. Put your fingers in your ears, we'll be done in three-and-a-half minutes.
DiBergi: Do you think that if you play those songs today, you'd be cancelled?
Smalls: Oh, I think that the whole 'Not Me' movement is over and, we're back. I think that's the whole story.
Tufnel: I think it's more now a 'Why Me' movement. And I do think we can play them, yeah.

David and Nigel, you've always had a sort of fractious relationship, but it seems like you're all on good terms. What's the secret to your longevity as a band?
Tufnel: We've had arguments over the years

and then made up... Arguments, make up, arguments, make up. But there's no secret, because there's no solution for an old friendship.
St. Hubbins: I think that the more we can leave our egos at the door, the better. But it's not easy. I carry my ego everywhere, but having a big ego is like having a big dog. You can't expect other people to feed it for you.
DiBergi: But you can leave your big dog at the door.
St. Hubbins: Or you can leave it at home.
Tufnel: Or you can not have a dog at all.
Smalls: Or bring him in. Bring him in and feed him.
St. Hubbins: You could bring him in, sure. There are so many ways to deal with a dog. Is that what we're talking about?
Smalls: I think so.
Tufnel: You can't give people advice, because everyone's different, and we're not perfect, you know, we have ups and downs. We get into fights, and then the fights end, and then we get in another fight.
St. Hubbins: We have peccadillos. We all have peccadilloes.
Tufnel: Well, we had peccadilloes in the old days, but I can't afford them now.
St. Hubbins: You can't buy 'em anywhere. They're not making good peccadilloes.
Tufnel: No, not good ones.

Derek, you don't seem to get into arguments so much. You always seem to keep the peace, somehow.
Smalls: The role I play in the band sort of reflects my personality. I'm lukewarm water, as I said in that hatchet job, I mean, that first film, you know. These guys, guitarists, tend to be people who reach for the stars, and I'm the one who keeps his feet on the ground. And so I think that's part of the solution. And if I think of another cliché, I'll tell you about it.
St. Hubbins: He's run out of clichés. We need fresh clichés.
Smalls: Always.
St. Hubbins: To go with the peccadilloes.
Tufnel: In the old days, because Derek didn't speak very much, people thought, "Oh, he's the wise one." I just don't think he was listening.

So what was it like being in the studio again? Did the chemistry, musically and personally, just come flooding back?
Tufnel: Well, "flooding" is not correct. Flooding would imply something different.
St. Hubbins: Seepage.
Tufnel: Yeah, leakage, I would say.
St. Hubbins: Rising damp.
Tufnel: I think, you know, music is the thing that joins us. So when you get together, you have your instruments, it falls back in very quickly.
Smalls: It's like riding a bicycle. You get back on it and you're back on it.
St. Hubbins: It's like riding a bicycle with a deer in your headlights. See, I combined the clichés to make a new one. I must say that when we sat down to redo 'Flower People' with Sir Elton on the vocals, to me it was like a breath of fresh air, because there we were, backing this great singer doing our material, and we just sort of relaxed into that and that nice kind of sideman vibe. By the way, I ran into the guy who runs The Troubadour. Elton John owes them one more show. I think you could get on that, Marty, I think there's a film in that.
DiBergi: I would love it. Do you think he would invite you to play with him?
St. Hubbins: In a heartbeat.
DiBergi: Well, that I would love to document.
St. Hubbins: We'll talk about it.

This sounds like a scoop! I hope it happens.
St. Hubbins: Oh, you can't say anything. Because it might happen. And then we'll have to pay you.

***SPINAL TAP II: THE END CONTINUES* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 12 SEPTEMBER**

Getty Images

TAP ON TAP

THE BAND ON THREE OF THEIR MOST PROFOUND SONGS

'HELL HOLE' (1984)

An epic journey of a man who learns to appreciate his humble beginnings, 'Hell Hole' is Tap at their most anthemic. And lyrically, it has much to say. "The lesson is that as you grow older, you get into a higher class of hell hole. If you're lucky," suggests Derek Smalls. Four decades since the song was unleashed, that's exactly what's happening to this band. "As you get older, you forget things," says Nigel Tufnel. Including where you're going, and where you are. "You can find yourself in the wrong hell hole, and that's an uncomfortable thing."

'BACK FROM THE DEAD' (2000)

This number, says David St. Hubbins, was written when the band were considering going back on the road, which they eventually did a few years later "in a very abbreviated fashion". But, naturally, this is about more than touring. "Our form of music is always dancing on the line of death," explains Smalls. "We'd gone away for a bit, and in that sense, we'd crossed over. And so this was a celebration of being reborn. Also it was a triumph over death itself. Every day, you're either dead or you're not."

'ROCKIN' IN THE URN' (2025)

A potential classic in the making from their new film, this one is similarly defiant when it comes to the Grim Reaper. "This was just a way of saying, 'We're so devoted to what we do musically that we're not going to stop doing it,'" Smalls tells us. "It's not literal. I mean, I'm not going to get my bass into a little fucking urn, am I?" Tufnel says he's not so sure. "Gotta be a very big urn," counters Smalls. "Or a very little bass."

WORDS DAN JOLIN

SOMEHOW — DECADES AFTER THE ORIGINAL CULT-CLASSIC — A GANG OF LUNATICS HAVE REMADE **THE TOXIC AVENGER**. AS THE POLLUTED MUTANT RAMPAGES ANEW, WE DELVE INTO THE SLIME

A gang of cackling miscreants tear down the street in their car. They aim it at a kid wobbling happily along on his bicycle, smashing into him and sending him flying over the windshield. Then, as the poor, bloodied 12-year-old crawls across the Tarmac, they reverse over his head. *Crunch*. It splits open like a melon filled with beef mince.

Ask anyone what scene from 1984's *The Toxic Avenger* has lodged most firmly in their minds, and there's a good chance that the above is what they'll describe. It certainly made the deepest impression on Macon Blair. "That moment," he says, "is when you think, 'What the *fuck* are they *doing*?!'"

Blair might also have cited the scene in which the cult film's title character — a melty-faced, mop-wielding, tutu-wearing "monster hero" who fights crime in Tromaville, New Jersey ("toxic-waste capital of the world") — kills a little old lady by throwing her in a tumble dryer. Or the bit where a guide dog is mercilessly blasted with a shotgun. But, like we said, it's the head-squish that's stayed with him since he first saw the movie, on a friend's older brother's VHS when he was just six years old.

You may remember Blair as the main character in Jeremy Saulnier's offbeat revenge flick *Blue Ruin*. Or, more recently, his small role in Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* (as Oppie's lawyer). But this seasoned character actor is also a writer-director: firstly of 2016 indie award-winner *I Don't Feel At Home In This World Anymore*, and now of a much-delayed remake of, yes indeedy, *The Toxic Avenger*. Which might reasonably beg the question: what the *fuck* is he *doing*?!

WEE SIX-YEAR-old Blair wasn't simply shocked by *The Toxic Avenger*. He loved it. And he was inspired by it. "This was rock 'n' roll," he tells *Empire* from his home in Austin, Texas. "That cartoonish over-the-top violence and deliberate grossness, but also its kind-heartedness, was the kind of tone I was chasing in my own home movies. And because the effects were so low-budget, it seemed very accessible. It was like, 'Oh, *we* could do this kind of thing!'" It wasn't like he spent his life thinking, "One day I'm gonna remake *Toxic Avenger*," he insists. "But because it came into my life at that really formative time, it stayed in there somewhere."

Directed by Lloyd Kaufman and Michael Herz of shoestring funster outfit Troma Entertainment, the 1984 original was partly inspired by Rachel Carlson's 1962 book *Silent Spring* (explaining the film's environmentalist concerns) — and also by Kaufman's time as a pre-production supervisor on *Rocky*, when he developed a desire to make a film in which people are horribly killed by gym equipment.

Soon after release, *The Toxic Avenger* became a midnight-movie favourite in '80s New York, then a video-nasty-era VHS hit. Like a loveable rash, word quickly spread about this transgressive, cheap-as-chips superhero horror-comedy, in which a gawky, horny gym-club mop boy named Melvyn Junko (Mark Torgl) gets thrown into a vat of "cancerogenic" toxic waste and transforms into a "hideously deformed creature of superhuman size and strength" (Mitch Cohen). Nicknamed 'Toxie', he

Clockwise from far left: Green agenda: Toxie (Luisa Guerreiro, voiced by Peter Dinklage) on the prowl; Nu metal monstercore rockers The Killer Nutz, with creepy Fritz Garbinger (Elijah Wood, right); Toxie means brutal business; Winston Gooze (Dinklage) with young charge Wade (Jacob Tremblay); Golden hour; Bob Garbinger (Kevin Bacon) with assistant Kissy Sturnevan (Julia Davis).

is hapless, well-meaning, weirdly likeable and only kills bad people — in incredibly, ludicrously violent ways.

Three sequels followed, plus a Marvel comic, a Broadway musical and an early '90s kids' cartoon series titled *Toxic Crusaders*, which elaborated on the original's anti-pollution message. This was the closest Toxie, and indeed Troma, ever got to the big time. To quote Kaufman, who's now 79 years old and still going strong, "If you're going to penetrate the hymen of the mainstream, you will get fucked! I'm living proof of it." He's mentored filmmakers who've made it big — Trey Parker, Matt Stone and James Gunn are all Troma alumni — but never managed that himself. Though one suspects the big time couldn't handle him. "Fuck the mainstream!" he yells down our Zoom call. "It's us against the cartels! That's the message!"

Still, there were various attempts over the years to pull off a large-scale remake. *Lord Of The Rings* studio New Line had a *Toxic Crusaders* adaptation in development during the '90s, before *Hot Tub Time Machine* director Steve Pink came close with a toned-down take on the original movie that was set to star Arnold Schwarzenegger. But it took a collaboration between Blair and Legendary Pictures (makers of the Godzilla/Kong films) to finally make it happen.

"I had lots of reasons in my head why it probably wouldn't work," says Blair, recalling his early pitch meetings with Legendary, who secured the rights from Troma in late 2018 (producer Alex Garcia, it turned out, was another fan). "I assumed that they would only want a kind of self-serious, PG-13 version in the *Dark Knight* sort of mould. And I just said, 'It should be goopy and sloppy and kinda dumb and kinda loving and just throw all this stuff out there. Now, just tell me to leave.' But they were like, 'No, dude, we like it!'"

Suddenly Blair had the chance "to go back in time and make one of those movies that we would make in our backyard, but just with ›

a bigger budget and with Hollywood actors." But while he was keen to keep the original's "homespun quality", he knew the main character had to change. "I felt that redoing a story where the guy is 19 years old and he's trying to get laid wouldn't be as fun," Blair explains. "So I thought we should start from scratch with a brand-new guy who ends up having the same set of unfortunate circumstances happen to him."

This new guy is Winston Gooze, a sad-sack janitor who works at an environment-devastating health-product factory owned by a preening snake-oil salesman named Bob Garbinger (Kevin Bacon). Winston is struggling to step-parent his recently deceased girlfriend's son (Jacob Tremblay) when he learns that he is suffering a terminal illness himself. Then, wouldn't ya know it? A monstercore band of motley psychos, who work for Garbinger, toss him into toxic waste, having mistaken him for an accomplice to a vigilante environmentalist named J.J. Doherty (Taylour Paige). And lo, the all-new Toxic Avenger is born.

All Blair had to do now was find a Hollywood actor crazy enough to play him.

"HAVING BEEN BORN and raised in New Jersey, I'm very familiar with toxic waste, and all things toxic," jokes Peter Dinklage. Like Blair, he encountered Kaufman and Herz's *Toxic Avenger* on VHS as a kid: "It was just so underground, and somewhat taboo, and it felt unlike any other film." He'd also known Blair for a few years, and the pair had been looking for a project together. So when the director sent Dinklage his script, the actor immediately clicked with its splatterpunk spirit.

Given Kaufman and Herz's Toxie was, by definition, "of superhuman size and strength", the 4' 5" Dinklage might not have been many filmmakers' first choice for the role. But, in Blair's out-of-the-box mind, the decision to cast the erstwhile Tyrion Lannister was "as easy as knowing that we had about 30 minutes at the top of the movie where the audience needed to start rooting for this guy. Once the character mutates and disappears under the layers of make-up, I wanted to make sure that you didn't lose whatever connection you had with him."

In terms of sealing the deal, Dinklage was relieved to learn he wasn't expected to don Toxie's green-skinned, pustule-festooned full-body prosthetic suit, complete with animatronic distended eyeball. Blair had always envisioned the movie as sticking with the original's 'man in a suit' approach, where a different, larger actor physically steps in after the transformation. Mo-cap and CGI, apart from being too costly, would have ruined the film's "charm", says Blair. Although, in this instance that larger actor was actually a woman: 4' 9" British-Portuguese performer Luisa Guerreiro.

The under-make-up gender switch "wasn't an issue", Blair tells us. "Luisa had the best audition. It was a simple as that. We looked at a bunch of folk and the thing was, a lot of them had really great physical auditions — doing stunts and tumbling and swinging mops — but she also crushed it for the dramatic portions. She's got to sit there and do a performance that's going to be on a level of what Peter would do, because we're creating the illusion that it's Winston."

Pulling off that trick required a long, painstaking process that involved Dinklage and Guerreiro rehearsing together for a few weeks before filming started in Sofia, Bulgaria, back in June 2021. As he acted out Toxie's scenes, "She was just incredibly tuned in, watching me like a hawk," Dinklage explains. "It was a new experience for me and I loved it. And I thank her on bended knee because she was also wearing that suit in the height of summertime. A delicate young actor like myself would have had a case of the vapours, and need constant irrigation. Having done long, hot days with heavy clothing

Clockwise from far left: Director Macon Blair chats to Dinklage on set; Avenging janitor Toxie knows how to use a mop; Taylour Paige as Toxie ally J.J. Doherty; Nefariousness abounds; Winston's not afraid to push the fashion boundaries.

on in *Game Of Thrones*, I know it can be pretty torturous. Nobody likes it when an actor complains, but that latex does not breath like a cotton fabric. So I really applaud her, and I'm so grateful to her for taking on the heavy lifting of the performance."

However, that performance is just a single part of a whole Day-Glo tapestry of anarchy mounted by Blair during that Bulgarian summer.

"We leaned into the absurdity," says Taylour Paige, whose character J.J. becomes a kickass ally to Winston during the course of the story. "It just couldn't get more ridiculous each day."

Some of those days involved exploding heads, highly acidic urine, and, among other weirdnesses, a huge hitman wearing a rooster mask. Paige has a full-on fight scene with British comedian Julia Davis (who plays Garbinger's unhinged assistant) in which she thwacks Davis with a toilet bowl. "I think that's unprecedented," says Paige, proudly. "Have I seen anything where someone gets hit in the head with a toilet? I can't say I have..."

Kevin Bacon, meanwhile, had a ball as the bad guy: a vain healthcare magnate who sees Winston's "evolution" as the key to untold riches and, more importantly, approbation. "I've certainly played my share of narcissists before, but Bob takes narcissism to such a new level that it was a fun thing to explore," says Bacon. "He has a bottomless pit of need to be seen and validated." Blair says he's grateful to Bacon for taking "this incredible leap of faith" in joining the movie, "especially because his character is such a bonehead. He went very broad and silly with this role."

Kaufman had a good time when he visited for a few days, too. We think. "Bulgaria's a cool country," he says. "Beautiful food. And the *women*, I tell you... But I had to pay round-trip so that I could come to the set. That's great, isn't it? Fifty-million-dollar movie. Thank you!"

Blair says the shoot was "bananas". Bigger than anything he'd worked on previously, "by orders of magnitude. It was just enormous. But it was a really tightly run ship, so I would only start to get freaked out at night when I would think, 'Oh shit, tomorrow is a huge day. We've got to shoot a concert scene with 200 extras!' And I would psych myself out, and then we would get on set and it would be fine."

Empire wonders if, amid all the upscaled Tromatic craziness, Blair dared to replay the infamous head-crunching moment. "We ended up not putting in a version of the kid getting run over," the director confirms. "I felt like we could do a new thing with the mop, and we could do a new thing with the tutu, but there were some things where I thought, 'If we just did that again, then it's not going to be as cool because it'll be so obviously like, "Oh we felt we had to check this box."'"

Comparison with the original is something he should be braced for. There are many Troma faithful out there. But, at the very least, he can be certain he has the approval of the original's creator. "The movie is terrific!" barks Kaufman. "No joke. I would say it's better than the first *Toxic Avenger*. The effects are great. It's funny as fuck. It's got the great political themes. Macon Blair was a brilliant choice. He's a great guy. He does what he wants. He doesn't do any of that shit that you see on the Oscars, and kiss ass!"

Though, while he wasn't actively involved in the production (aside from performing a cameo), Kaufman does tell us he sent Blair some notes. "But Macon wisely didn't take any of them."

What kind of notes?, *Empire* asks Blair. "It was the last week of shooting," the director recalls, "and Lloyd calls me up and says, 'I saw a news story about a woman whose breasts were so gigantic, and she used them to smother a man to death. I think you should put that in the movie.' I was like, 'Um. Wow. We're at the end of our schedule. I don't know that we can create a new scene to accommodate this.' So I felt bad about that."

He needn't. Kaufman clearly isn't bothered, and is confident his Troma tribe will dig the movie, regardless. "If the fans show up, they will have a blast, because there are all sorts of Troma Easter eggs and call-backs in there," he says. And while Blair clearly wants the film to appeal to Troma devotees, he also hopes it will reach a larger audience, and describes it as being made in the same spirit as *Airplane!* and *The Naked Gun*. Which is why he's so relieved that, after years of struggling to find a distributor, his film's getting a cinematic release.

"It plays better with a crowd," Blair insists. "Like: have a sixer and go to the theatre! It's just big, loud, dumb, silly fun."

So that, right there, is what Macon Blair is doing. And why the fuck not?

***THE TOXIC AVENGER* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 29 AUGUST**

TRUE TROMANCE

LLOYD KAUFMAN ON SOME TROMA ESSENTIALS

TROMEO AND JULIET (1996)

"I was working on this for five years, and James Gunn comes in and in one week he finished the script. He got 100 bucks for that. It came out as a brilliant movie. It has seven urination scenes in it."

TERROR FIRMA (1998)

"This is one of my more personal films. I play a blind director, who thinks he's making art. Whether he is or isn't is up to you. But he has something to say. Even though he's blind and stupid."

CITIZEN TOXIE: THE TOXIC AVENGER IV (2000)

"Nobody knows about *Citizen Toxie*! He's fighting for the little people of Tromaville, and it deals with abortion back in 1999, and plastic surgery on teenagers, and all sorts of other stuff."

#SHAKESPEARESSHITSTORM (2020)

"It's my adaptation of *The Tempest*, and a lot of it's in iambic pentameter. I had to be like Willy Loman, trying to sell it to independent theatres. So there you go."

OPEN UP

With **A BIG BOLD BEAUTIFUL JOURNEY**, stars Colin Farrell and Margot Robbie, alongside director Kogonada, enter doors to new worlds – both on and off screen

WORDS **IANA MURRAY**

LIKE EVERYONE ELSE, KOGONADA had been stuck indoors. The world was tentatively emerging from lockdown, and it had been a number of years since his debut feature stunned Sundance — though his sons were less interested. "[My youngest] fell asleep at *Columbus* five minutes in," he recalls of the boy's response to his walking-and-talking indie drama. So, having experienced our respective worlds shrink down to the confines of our homes, Kogonada stepped through doors into other universes that extended far beyond the four walls around him — by letting his children decide what to watch.

"I had this idea with my kids that I wouldn't push all the films that I loved," he tells *Empire*. "I have this whole collection of films, and it will always be there for them. I just thought, 'I'm going to let them love whatever they love.'" As such, he and the family devoured Marvel movies, *Star Wars*, and a lot of anime. His youngest son was particularly fond of Makoto Shinkai, the director behind expansive mega-hits *Weathering With You* and *Your Name*. In turn, Kogonada introduced the family to the fantasy worlds of Hayao Miyazaki.

When Kogonada first read the script for *A Big Bold Beautiful Journey* (by *The Menu*'s Seth Reiss) in 2022, he saw how those anime influences could bleed in — where ambition and intimacy could co-exist, where the fantastical could also be grounded. And how a film with the artistic integrity he wanted to retain within the Hollywood studio system could also appeal to his boys.

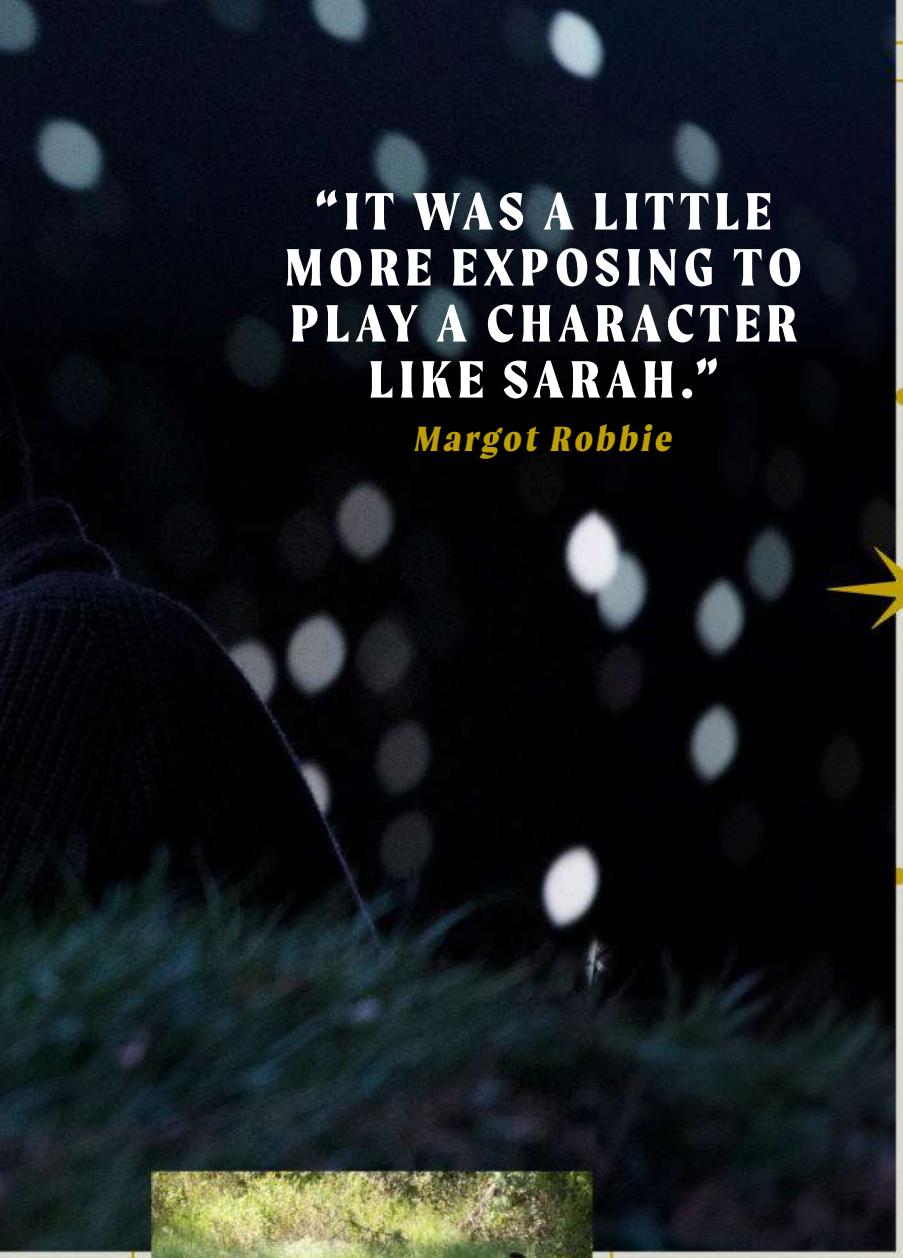
From its title alone, *A Big Bold Beautiful Journey* is loaded with heavy expectations. It conjures images of grand, sweeping adventures and life-altering experiences. What it says on the tin, essentially. That's what Margot Robbie felt when she saw those words on the front page of the script. "I am a sucker for a long title," she gushes. "I will go see a movie just if it has a long, crazy title."

Kogonada liked that unforgettable title too, but he also recognised that the story touched on the same themes that tied together his gentle, deeply human works about alienated individuals yearning for connection. 2017's *Columbus* was a delicate observation of a tentative friendship set against the stunning backdrop of the titular architectural haven in Indiana. His 2021 follow-up, *After Yang*, was a lo-fi sci-fi reverie about a father discovering the curiosity and compassion inside his daughter's android companion.

In *A Big Bold Beautiful Journey*, the connection begins with an unabashed meet-cute: aimless drifters David (Colin Farrell) and Sarah (Margot Robbie) are the lone singles at a wedding, though their walls are too high for either to make a move. On his way home the next day, David's wayward (possibly magical) sat nav asks him the fateful question: "Do you want to go on a big, bold, beautiful journey?" Soon, he's rerouted back to Sarah, and the two drive into the unknown, in an adventure across space and time, and into the memories that calcified them. "It's a little Dickens," as Farrell puts it. It's also about how the past informs the future — how our pain and heartache can close us off from the pursuit of love.

The story resonated immensely with Kogonada, who found that it was "comedic and romantic, that it was absurd and tragic, and that it had muck and magic". And it found him at just the right time, when he was on the hunt for a project that would stretch the boundaries of his filmmaking. "It tapped into something that I was in the mood to explore," he says. "[I wanted to] expand my own cinematic language."

Kogonada's movies are bold, and they are undeniably beautiful. Now, though, it was time to get bigger.



"IT WAS A LITTLE MORE EXPOSING TO PLAY A CHARACTER LIKE SARAH."

Margot Robbie

Clockwise from main: Sarah (Margot Robbie) and David (Colin Farrell); A trip to remember; Seeing the light; Farrell and Robbie on location with director Kogonada.

POSTING ONLINE UNDER his pseudonym — derived from the screenwriter Kogo Noda, a frequent collaborator with the legendary Japanese director Yasujirō Ozu — Kogonada made his start in video essays that broke down the works of filmmakers ranging from Wes Anderson to Stanley Kubrick. When he made the transition to directing himself, his singular style was clear from the beginning, even as he drew inspiration from those he made his name dissecting. He crafts carefully composed frames and moments that embrace calmness and silence, yet every shot is vividly coloured in quiet emotion — where characters feel so profoundly but are often reticent about expressing this aloud.

Confessions and soul-baring conversations are spoken in soft whispers, but the weight of the words reverberate through your bones like earthquakes. Such is the case in *After Yang*, when the titular robot (Justin H. Min) admits he longs for a history and identity of his own. Or in *Columbus*, when all the sound fades away to underscore how Casey's (Haley Lu Richardson) passion for architecture isn't just evident in what she says — it courses through every inch of her body.

Kogonada had dabbled in epic storytelling before, albeit on the small screen: he's an executive producer on the Apple TV+ series *Pachinko*, a decades-spanning tale that details how the Japanese occupation of Korea ripples through multiple generations of one family (he also directed four of the first season's eight episodes). Much to the delight of his sons, in 2024 he also helmed two episodes of *Star Wars* show *The Acolyte*, where he was able to recruit his *After Yang* star Jodie Turner-Smith as the leader of a matriarchal space coven.

More than anything, travelling to that galaxy was a lesson, one that proved to be invaluable to *A Big Bold Beautiful Journey*. On the set of *The Acolyte*, he had more toys to play with than ever before, but he says that he had to understand how "not to use tools just for the sake of it". He had to be economical in the face of excess. "I can have three Technocranes, and you're in *Star Wars*, it's just limitless. There's sometimes an expectation to use everything."

Luckily, restraint is Kogonada's superpower. Farrell, reuniting with his *After Yang* director, noticed his distinct sensibility — the gentle hand, the noise in the silence — when he first watched *Columbus*. "It was all in whispered notes," says the actor. "It was without any big cinematic moments and all that other stuff that we love, but it was so different and so gorgeous. The really exciting thing for myself is Kogonada's cinematic voice, and his interest in the deep oceans of feeling that we all inevitably experience through our years and our days."

To get a feel for the tone of *A Big Bold Beautiful Journey*, Kogonada provided Farrell and Robbie with a list of films that inspired him. *Dead Poets Society* was there, as was *Hiroshima Mon Amour* and *The Bridges Of Madison County*. Together, they watched Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise* at a cinema in Santa Monica, then *Before Sunset* a few weeks later. They've yet to pluck up the courage to tackle *Before Midnight*. "I think we're all hesitant because we don't want to get to the end," Robbie laughs. It's an apt point of comparison, though, as she and Farrell explain that, like Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy's Jesse and Celine, David and Sarah fall in love by talking endlessly about life, not knowing where the conversation might go, but revelling in simply being in each other's company.

Before signing up for *A Big Bold Beautiful Journey*, Kogonada was thinking a lot about gateway films: ones that irrevocably change you and fuel a lifelong passion for cinema. He could see that wonder lighting up in his children, and the titles that sparked that for ›

him were the classic studio films of the past where the fantastical felt real. "I love that in some of these movies you see the backdrop is just a painting, and I'm so swept up," he says.

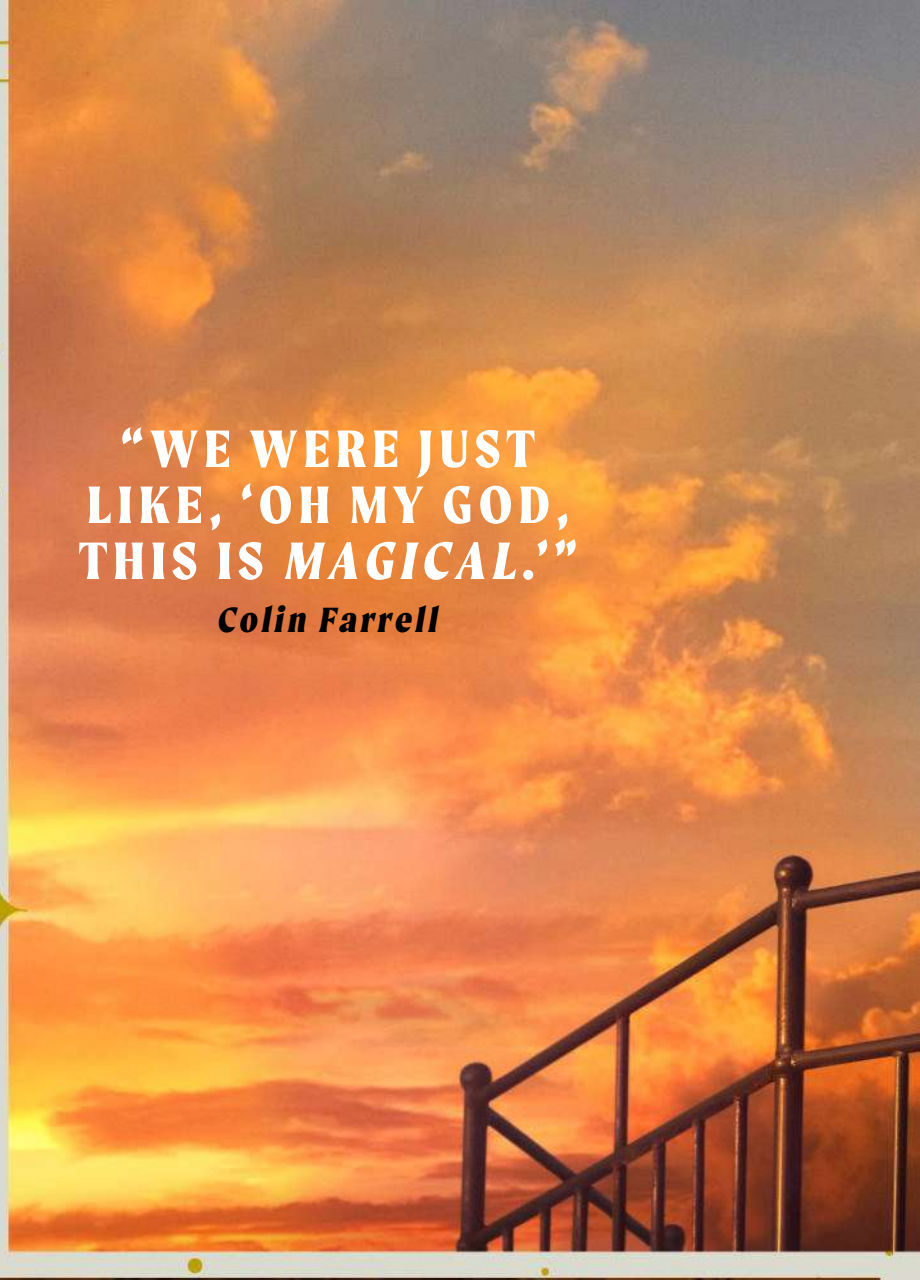
If he wanted that same sense of tangible wonder, he knew he had to go practical. The time-travel in the original version of the script would have forced Kogonada to rely on CGI more than he wished, so he introduced the device of magical doors to lead David and Sarah directly into the past. "I love the theatre of it," he explains. "When there's a door on stage, it can enter anywhere. You have the permission for it to be anything." He drew from movies like *The Truman Show*, whose heightened reality was felt precisely because of the tactility of their practical effects and sets. And on *A Big Bold Beautiful Journey*, they could create their own magic. But as Kogonada and his cast would discover, the extraordinary was happening every day.

IT WAS REALLY LIKE John Hughes took a shit all over this film," says Farrell. To clarify, that is a compliment. As David and Sarah travel back through their memories, there's a sequence where the pair step into the former's high school. On this specific night, David is about to have his first brush with heartbreak, and reliving the experience feels so uncannily fresh that his adult self gets giddy when he notices the same pain in his chest. (For David and Sarah, he's 40-something, but he looks 15 to everyone else.) This memory has also stayed with David because of his starring role in his school's production of the musical *How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying*.

The scene was one of the things that made Kogonada know he had to direct this film. "I think that is when my heart skipped a beat," he remembers. Farrell, though, was terrified of the sequence. Talking to *Empire* together, speaking to us in-between ADR sessions, he and Robbie are huddled around Farrell's phone, and at the mention of the musical, Robbie's voice immediately perks up: "Why the world doesn't know that Colin has an amazing singing voice *and* can dance..."

"Not at all!" Farrell interjects. "I was mortified." Robbie reassures him. "It was brilliant," she says. But he continues: "If I was watching the film on my own and I saw that scene, I'd have a panic attack. I have to say [though], it was a ton of fun." It tapped into the '80s movies he loved, the tidal wave of nostalgia, and, yes, the John Hughes of it all. "The significance of certain musical cues in our life, the memory of posters on the wall and mixtapes and arcade video games," he explains of the cultural residue.

The film's own music was intrinsic to that



"WE WERE JUST LIKE, 'OH MY GOD, THIS IS *MAGICAL*.'"

Colin Farrell

Right: Golden glow. **Below:** A chance meeting?

Below left, top to bottom: Farrell with Kogonada on set; Phoebe Waller-Bridge and Kevin Kline also star; Making a connection.

feeling too, thanks to a score from legendary composer (and Studio Ghibli mainstay) Joe Hisaishi. Remarkably, it's his first for an American film, and when Kogonada received the offer from the musician whose symphonies were the soundtrack of his time in lockdown, it felt almost good to be true: "I think I melted on the spot."

Serendipity, in fact, was never far from the production. A song by the German electronic band Tangerine Dream that Farrell mentioned in rehearsals played on the car radio on the final day of production. After both actors finished reading Walt Whitman's *Leaves Of Grass*, they noticed a Whitman's box of chocolates on set. And the actor who was playing David's high-school teacher also starred in his school's production of the very same musical.

Maybe those were all just coincidences, and not some higher power making the stars align. But it all felt incredibly appropriate for a film that mines larger-than-life majesty in the everyday. "Some of the most profound moments seem to be the moments that, at the time, were mundane," Farrell offers. There's beauty in the ordinary.

Like this one little moment in the Californian countryside. "Remember that night we walked to the end of the road?" Robbie reminisces with Farrell. "We just stood there for a second looking at our crew, this little carny circus in the middle of nowhere. We were just like, 'Oh my God, this is *magical*.'"

SARAH AND DAVID ARE both at points of personal crisis when they first meet at the film's opening wedding, though perhaps they would be afraid to admit that. "He's just living in a certain degree of apathy," Farrell explains. "He's moving through life in something of a midlife haze." Robbie echoes: "She's also reached a point where she's recognised that she is falling into similar cycles, and wants to get out of it, but can't see a way out." Quips Farrell: "Her walls are a little higher than his. A few more bricks and mortar."

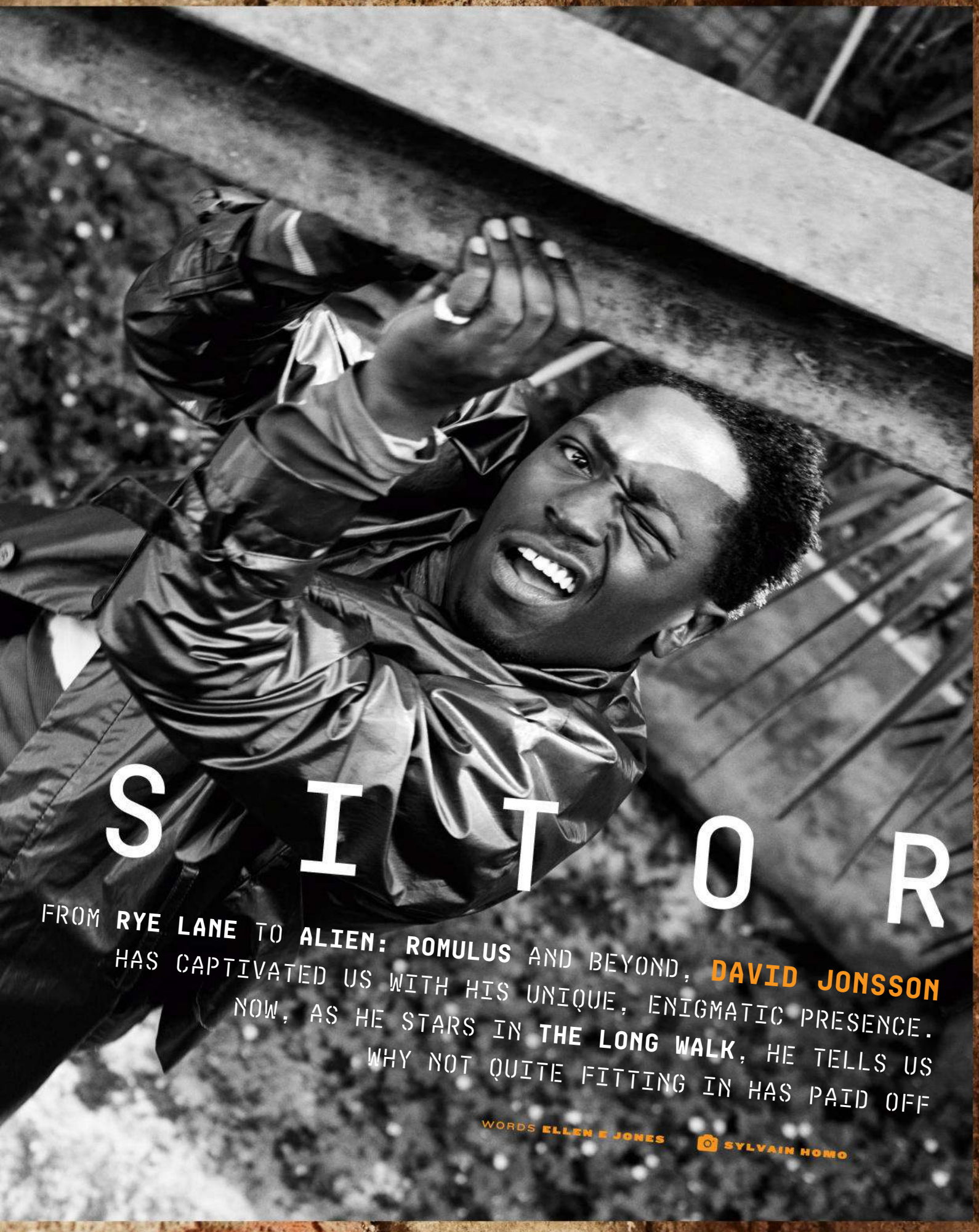
It would be impossible to put up any kind of wall around Kogonada. When Farrell starred in *After Yang*, he was able to operate on a level of vulnerability that both thrilled him and made him nervous. It excited Kogonada as well, and both were eager to reunite on another film. "I just loved how restrained he was," the director says of Farrell's low-key performance in *After Yang*. "I wanted to be a part of him playing more notes and more octaves."

Robbie, meanwhile, found that working with Kogonada meant flexing an entirely new muscle: "He really has this ability to sit in stillness that I've never been able to achieve." She had grown accustomed to embodying roles that were so distant from her: loud, confident and oftentimes volatile women who aren't afraid to act on their first impulses. The gap between the likes of Harley Quinn and a humble woman from Queensland spans oceans. Here, Robbie had to take a leap. "I saw a lot of things in Sarah," she says, "that I could see in myself — not necessarily good things — and so maybe it was a little more exposing to play a character like Sarah."

In essence, that's what *A Big Bold Beautiful Journey* explores. Opening yourself up to the possibility of connection, in all forms, comes at a great risk. As it was for those who made it. Kogonada stepped up to helm his most ambitious project yet. Robbie embraced the opportunity to see herself reflected in a role, even the parts of herself she perhaps didn't want to admit were there. And — at one point quite literally — Farrell was willing to dance, and to sing new notes. With a brave twist of the handle, they were all opening new doors.

A BIG BOLD BEAUTIFUL JOURNEY IS IN CINEMAS FROM 19 SEPTEMBER

David Jonsson, photographed exclusively for *Empire* in London on 18 June 2025.



SITOR

FROM **RYE LANE** TO **ALIEN: ROMULUS** AND BEYOND, **DAVID JONSSON** HAS CAPTIVATED US WITH HIS UNIQUE, ENIGMATIC PRESENCE. NOW, AS HE STARS IN **THE LONG WALK**, HE TELLS US WHY NOT QUITE FITTING IN HAS PAID OFF

WORDS ELLEN E JONES SYLVAIN HOMO

THERE IS A SPECIFIC SMILE THAT **DAVID JONSSON** HAS IN HIS REPERTOIRE: HEAD SLIGHTLY BOWED, EYES LOOKING UPWARDS, MOUTH LOPSIDED AT THE CORNERS. IT IS SHY BUT SUAVE; FRIENDLY BUT FULL OF SECRETS. HE IS AN ACTOR WHO CAN BE RELIED UPON TO BRING A STRANGE OTHER-WORLDLINESS TO EVERY ROLE HE PLAYS.

Left: As Peter McVries, mid-gruelling contest in *The Long Walk*.

At 31, Jonsson is best known as old-Etonian investment banker Gus in the zeitgeist-y HBO series *Industry*, south London "sad-boi" Dom in 2023's much-beloved romcom *Rye Lane*, and Andy, an AI 'stimulant' with more heart than most humans, in *Alien: Romulus*. Such character types might have felt over-familiar in another actor's hands, but through Jonsson's rare qualities, they are reinvigorated almost beyond recognition.

This February, audiences declared themselves smitten, honouring him with the BAFTA Rising Star Award. His acceptance speech displayed that combination of sparkling social intelligence and inner calm which, in conversation, grants Jonsson an uncanny ability to intuit what others are thinking. When we talk, for instance, he's just disembarked from a much-delayed trans-Atlantic flight (exact origin point unspecified, but possibly the set of a rumoured, top-secret Frank Ocean film). Still, he focuses enough to answer not only the questions *Empire* asks out loud, but often also the unasked follow-up questions which might have come next.

It stands to reason that Jonsson's upcoming releases would include three of young, cool Hollywood's most covetable roles. In September, he'll play the pivotally enigmatic Peter McVries in *The Long Walk*, Francis Lawrence's adaptation of Stephen King's Vietnam War-era novel about a walking contest set by a totalitarian regime in a dystopian near-future. After that, he stars in *Scandalous*, Colman Domingo's story of showbiz virtuoso and Rat Pack linchpin Sammy Davis Jr's relationship with Kim Novak (Sydney Sweeney). And then there's that Frank Ocean project, in which Jonsson is said to be playing a version of the singer, as Ocean himself directs.

Good luck pinning Jonsson down on any of those specifics, however. He's still smiling that smile — and it remains full of secrets.

David, you're from Custom House in east London. Do you know who the other famous actor from Custom House is?
Danny Dyer? *Come on.* I had a Staffordshire Bull Terrier growing up. I used to take it for walks at this park called Cundy Park, up the road, and Danny Dyer would bring his dog there too and you'd just talk. He was like a star to us growing up, but he was so nice to everyone. Yeah, he's lovely, I love him.

What kind of a kid were you, back in those days?
Very, very shy. Extraordinarily shy. Introverted. I was just *really* quiet. My parents wonder why I'm an actor. In my musings about me being quiet, I've thought, "People always say that if you're an actor, you're meant to be extroverted." But the truth is, I don't think there's any correlation between the two. And I still feel like an introvert, by the way. But maybe my introverted nature informs what I do more than me being extroverted.

In what way?
Well, I think when you're introverted, the hardest thing to learn is how to take a beat to process. These are sweeping generalisations, of course, but extroverts can pick up the beat really quickly and run with it, [whereas] introverts are thinking about something, but feel like they need to talk and say something. I think taking that extra beat for me, as an actor, is everything. I'm not talking about pace, I'm talking about observation and just having a moment for yourself before you move. I'm someone who likes to observe behaviour around me, and people, and drink that in.

Did you feel like you fitted in?
Yes and no. I remember at times feeling like no-one really understood, or feeling like I couldn't communicate my thoughts. I still feel that way (*laughs*) — but I definitely felt that as a kid. And then there were other times when I felt at the centre of a social circle, enjoying having a laugh with my mates, playing some football. I didn't feel like an outsider, but I felt like an introvert, which is a weird contrast.

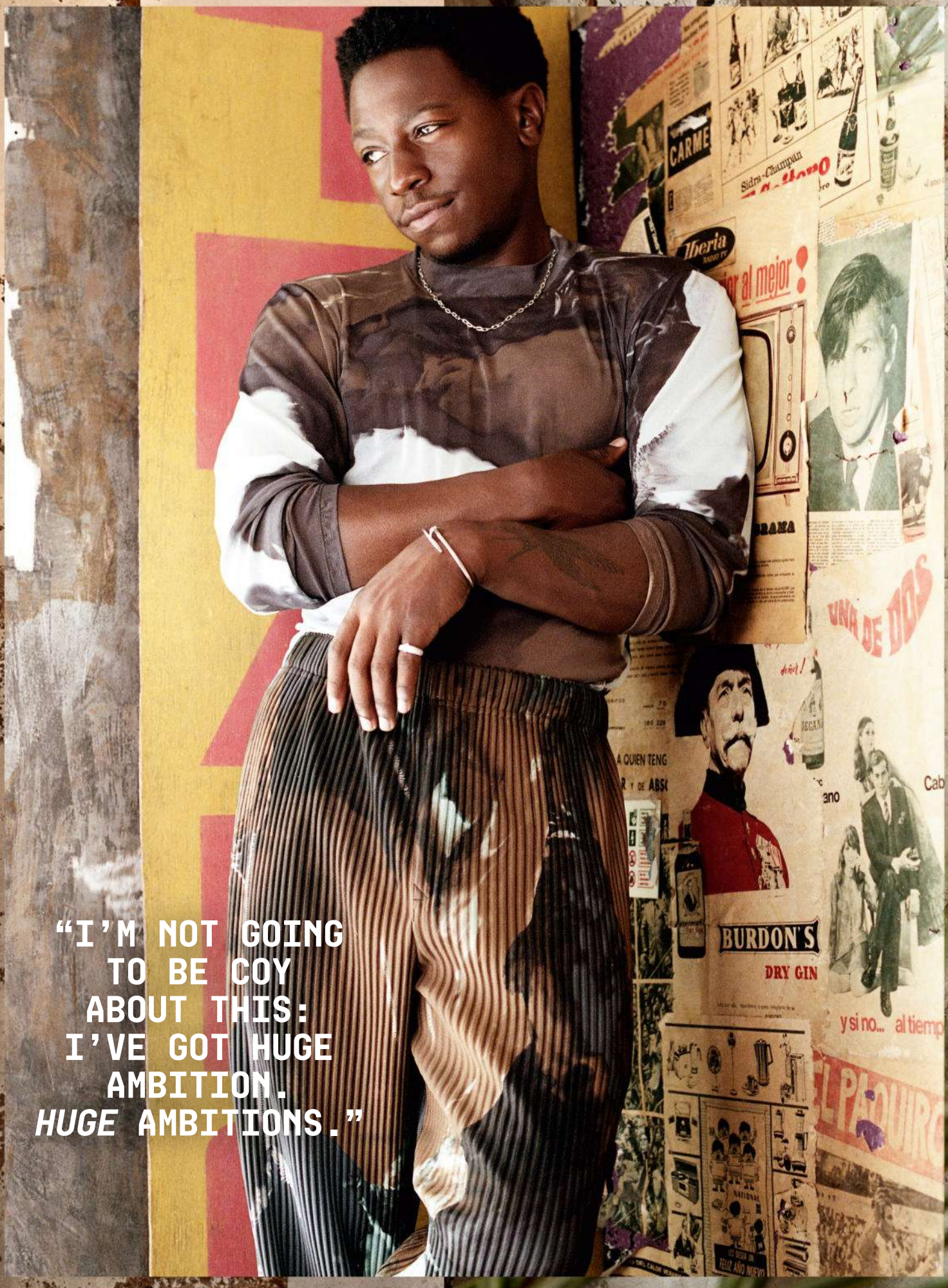
Legend has it you were expelled from school for fighting. Do you know what happened to the other guy?
(*Laughs*) Well, it was *guys*, actually; it was a couple of them. That's why I got kicked out, by the way. I think when you come from the East End, you're gonna fight at school. That's just natural, but I got kicked out because it was, like, *a lot* of people fighting.

It was a lot of people fighting and you started all of it?
I don't think I did... I'd like to say that I didn't. But, y'know, if something got started, I definitely finished it (*laughs*). But, do you know what? Honestly, I keep in touch with a lot of those people from the East End and I'm so happy to say everyone is doing really well. A couple of my mates have got lovely girlfriends, and they've just settled down, and some of them are doing great jobs. So, that's really nice, that we made it past that.

I'm surprised to hear you stay in touch with them, because you moved to New York at 16, to take up a scholarship place at The American Academy of Dramatic Arts.
Well, that period was quite pivotal. I think anyone who's of colour and comes from a ›

Previous page: Trenchcoat: APAR; Top: Homme Plissé Issey Miyake; Trousers: Gucci; Ring: Cartier; Boots: Tod's

Waistcoat and trousers: Homme Plissé Issey Miyake; Chain, ring and bracelet: Cartier; Shoes: Gucci



“I’M NOT GOING TO BE COY ABOUT THIS: I’VE GOT HUGE AMBITION. *HUGE* AMBITIONS.”

place that's relatively poor can understand that it's actually *not* being able to afford things. It's not *that,* so much as the poor mentality that comes with it. So for me, to go to New York at 16, it just broke open my perception of what I could even do in this world. And the people that I keep in touch with today from the East End were those people that saw, like, "Man, he's experiencing something, that maybe I can get, just by keeping in contact." Their experiences really inspire me, and they remind me of who I am — and by the way, if this whole acting thing never worked out, I'd still go back and have a pint with them, do you know what I mean? That's just my people.

Your first breakout role was as Gus in *Industry*, a character with a completely different background and childhood to the one you've just described. What do you most remember about that now?
What probably sticks in my mind most, actually, was having that first opportunity to see through a vision of a character. I think young actors can definitely attest to this, where you have these dreams of what the character is; how they talk, how they hold themselves in their body, all that kind of stuff. Then you get on set, all that goes out the window, and you're just screaming lines as best as you can. But with Gus — in particular, because he's so different from me as a person — my biggest memory is wanting to try things and actually being able to, because you have more time to do a character arc in TV than you do with film. I never want to be, like, a tricksy actor. It's not like, "Look how many cards I've got in my deck!" It's more just, when you have a vision of something that you know to be true, being able to put that on screen really is gratifying.

***Rye Lane* is such a beloved film, for so many people, especially Londoners and Black British people. What does it mean to you?**
It was my first lead role and my first movie, so I look back on it with fondness and appreciation. It's an indie film and we made it for next-to-nothing, but we had the best experience on that set and I do really believe that how we make movies is so important — sometimes even more than the art itself, the product. I remember, it just felt like we were making something special, by sheer virtue of having a good experience. Sometimes you don't have a great experience on set, and it still can be great. But for me, now, I know the difference. *Rye Lane* gave me that, for sure.

And do you see that reflected back to you, in the way that people talk about the film? Is it still one that people talk about?
Yes, and actually people that you don't expect. I mean, people in Britain 100 per cent do, and especially south Londoners, but I had a 60-year-old white woman from Dorset talk to me about *Rye Lane.* And also this young, cool American in New York City. It's really one of those films that just transcends. It's a trip!

Top to bottom: Meeting cute in Rye Lane, with Vivian Oparah; As AI Andy in *Alien: Romulus*; Playing old Etonian Gus in *Industry*, alongside Harry Lawtey.

While respecting what you said about not being "a tricksy actor", were there performance details in *Alien: Romulus* which helped convince an audience of Andy's non-human, synthetic nature?
Yes and no. Andy was a gem of a character on the page, and a gem of a character to play. For me, what you read and then interpret... it *wasn't* synthetic, actually. That came after, in understanding where he sits in the canon of the *Alien* universe. But it's all, "Where do I know this kind of behaviour from?" And, "What is the most interesting behaviour in this scenario?" And in that sense, I'm not drawing from old computers (*laughs*). It's all just real life, and people that I know, or think I know.

Andy has a particular 'rebooting' pose, which is utterly terrifying. Was that in the script?
That was all me. I looked up old African artefacts, ritualistic artefacts. I just thought, "What would that look like, if [shadowy, in-universe corporation] Weyland-Yutani had based the malfunction or rebooting off ancient artefacts?" I mean, Romulus and Remus is all ancient Roman mythology, that's where it came from. And also Fede [Alvarez, director and co-writer] never really said no to me, which was awesome.

***The Long Walk* feels strikingly relevant to the current moment, given it's based on a novel Stephen King began writing in the late 1960s. Why do you think that is?**
I knew while I was doing it that this was something that would feel relevant, and draw some form of parallel to the world that we're living in. I knew that was there, but I had no idea *how* relevant it was going to be. It feels really, really, timely. It's a people piece, man. I think that Stephen King knew that this would always be about the people [versus the state], and as long as we have a state, this story will always be relevant. I think people are really going to feel something, and that's all you really want when you make movies. I always say, "I'm not political, but the work is."

Did you bond with your cast mates more intensely than you usually would on a job?
100 per cent. Not only were we in close

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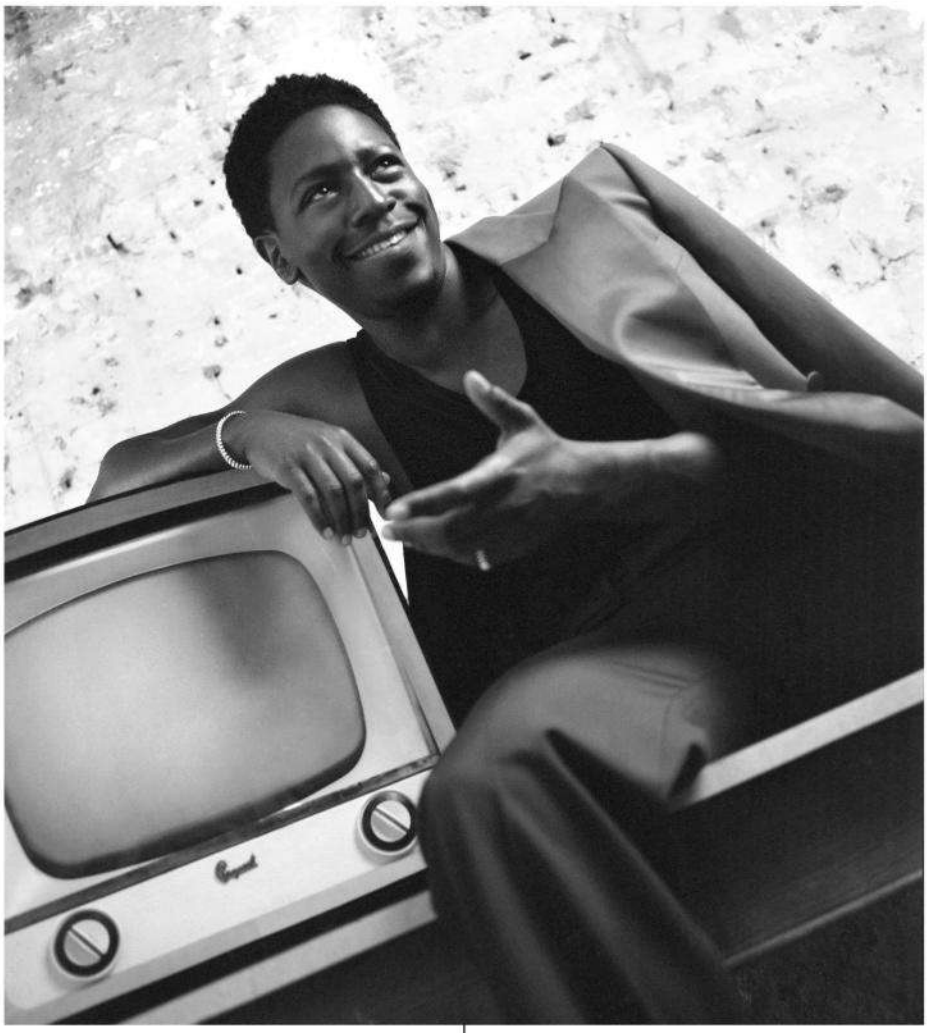
Top and trousers: Homme Plissé Issey Miyake; Chain, ring and bracelet: Cartier

proximity to each other, but we were literally walking a minimum of ten miles a day, in the beating sun of Winnipeg. If anything's gonna bring you together, it's an experience like that. But also, we really did try to go somewhere with the work that we were doing. Not for the sake of any vain glory, but just because, I think, of that kind of army mentality. When you're like a band of brothers, naturally, when you actually feel that bond, you just start seeing how far you can push it. And for us, it was in the work. It was, "How deep can we get into it?" So I really think all of the boys — it's Cooper [Hoffman], it's Charlie [Plummer], Tut [Nyuot], Ben [Wang], Garrett [Wareing], Jordan [Gonzalez], and we had these most amazing supporting artists who really were in the heat with us, burning in the sun — all of the boys really gave something, and I hope it gives them [something] back.

One of the most interesting aspects of the film — as a metaphor for soldiers in wartime, but also life generally — is how they seem to be simultaneously aware and unaware of their imminent deaths. How did you, as your character Peter McVries, carry that knowledge of death?
That is an *awesome* question. You've just given me butterflies. I think that one thing I found in playing him was, he has a certain way of seeing life that's a bit poetical. Personally, I don't think it's pretentious. It's just naturally poetical, in the way that I imagine a Nick Drake or any kind of amazing musician would think about life. And because of that, I remember really feeling, "Oh, there's something way bigger than all of us [here]." I don't know... I've felt that way sometimes, where it's like, "I'm not even thinking about death, but also *I am.*" I feel [the presence of death], and it's, like, two seconds away. And if it is... it is, you know? That's not morbid. It's just a weird feeling to talk about. I don't know if that answers you. I think I'm still picking it apart myself.

You are actually playing a musician soon, albeit a very different sort to Nick Drake. What interests you about Sammy Davis Jr, as a character?
First of all, there's definitely a massive physical element to him. My dad was a big music and film kind of guy and he used to show me this particular performance of [Davis Jr's] 'Mr. Bojangles' in Germany, and there's this physical element to who this man was. Anyone who knows me knows I love sport, so I'm looking at him on the same level that I do an athlete. It's almost like he's running a marathon every single time he does something, and I love that. But also, beyond that, we often say that the time you're in is what conditions the person that you become. I think that time that *he* was in... he made it look as if it was easy, and we know it wasn't, you know? And that is *super* interesting, because you're not just delving into a man; you're delving into a time, a society, a universe. That's super-delicious.



Have you started work on the Frank Ocean film yet?
Er... I don't know how much I'm allowed to say.

I'll just fire off some questions and you can politely demur, if you like. Do you and Frank Ocean have any favourite films in common?
Um... Yeah, go on. What did we talk about the other day...? We did bond over films. Frank is definitely a cinephile, as am I. We discussed [Gus Van Sant's] *My Own Private Idaho*, although one minute he kind of likes it and the next he's pointing out the things he would do differently, which I think is a sign of a good filmmaker, you know? How you take something and push it further. He definitely has that. We spoke about so many different films, [Gus Van Sant's] *Paranoid Park* and a couple of Japanese movies, because I like Japanese movies.

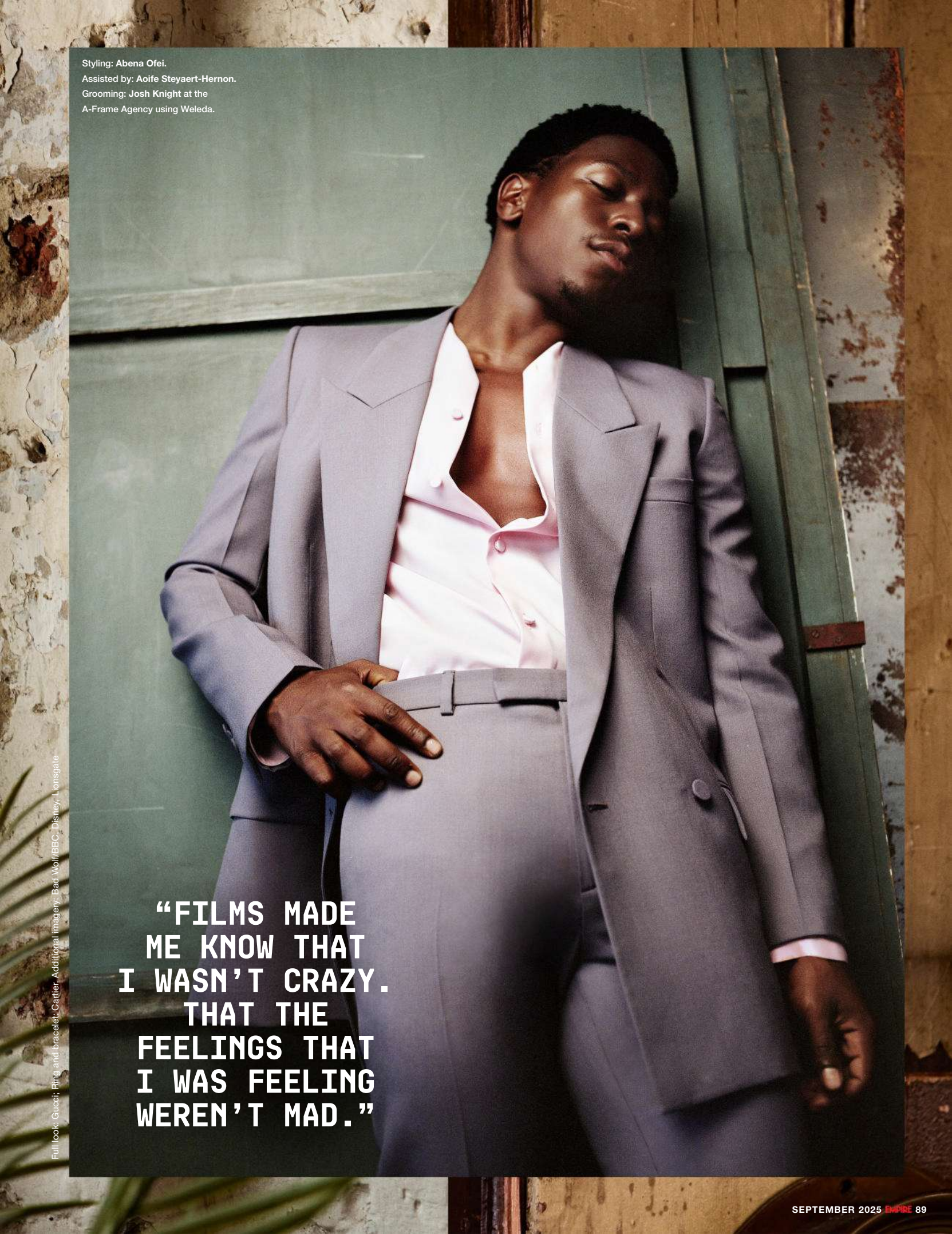
The pressure of playing a person while being directed by that same person must be immense.
Um... that would imply that I'm doing... I'll politely pass on that. But that was a good one, though! You almost got me... *you almost got me.*

Everything seems to be happening in your career. You're doing so many fascinating roles and bringing a really interesting energy to them, but what are your biggest unfulfilled ambitions?
I'm not going to be coy about this: I've got huge ambition. *Huge* ambitions. I feel so lucky to be doing what I'm doing, because I'm doing it how I want to and playing characters the way I hope to. There are many directors, probably too many to name, that I want to work with, but I am also keen on writing and directing. I actually just started a production company, greyarea, to not just harness my voice, but also others'. Look, film really gave me so much. I could go as far as to say it changed my life. That sounds too dramatic — but it really gave me a lot. So I want to be able to give back.

What did film give you?
I think it made me know that I wasn't crazy. The feelings that I was feeling weren't mad. What's coming to my mind right now is [2009 Andrea Arnold film] *Fish Tank*. And coming from where I come from, I remember watching something like *Fish Tank*, and I was like, "I know *every single one* of these people." And [prior to watching] I didn't even think about what she might be going through — like, "she" is the girl from *Fish Tank*. And I'm like, "Oh, man. Do you know what? I'll cut her a bit more slack." So I'm never gonna downplay it: I think the arts are vital. It gives us so much; to use and to grow with and to reflect on. And I never normally say this about my movies, [because] I just want people to enjoy them, but I really do hope that's what *The Long Walk* does; gives people something to reflect on.

THE LONG WALK IS IN CINEMAS FROM 12 SEPTEMBER

Suit: Amiri; Vest: BDXY; Ring and bracelet: Cartier



Styling: **Abena Ofei.**
Assisted by: **Aoife Steyaert-Hernon.**
Grooming: **Josh Knight** at the
A-Frame Agency using Weleda.

“FILMS MADE ME KNOW THAT I WASN’T CRAZY. THAT THE FEELINGS THAT I WAS FEELING WEREN’T MAD.”

Full look: Gucci; Ring and bracelet: Cartier. Additional imagery: Bad Wolf/BBC, Disney, Lionsgate

SPINACH

PIPE DREAM

WHEN ROBERT ALTMAN TOOK ON A SPINACH-SWIGGING SAILOR, HOPING TO MAKE A MOVIE STAR OF ROBIN WILLIAMS, MANY CONSIDERED IT A BIG SWING. THEY WERE RIGHT. SURVIVORS TELL US HOW **POPEYE** GOT LOST AT SEA

WORDS **JAMIE GRAHAM**

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ROBERT ALTMAN IS BATTLING AN UNRULY octopus. It's June 1980, and the director and his crew of hundreds are stuck on the small Mediterranean island of Malta. They've been shooting for almost six months — some have been there a year — and Altman needs to hastily capture the finale of his big-budget musical-comedy *Popeye* before returning to the US.

It's a tricky sequence, even for the maverick genius behind such innovative pictures as *M*A*S*H* and *Nashville*, requiring the famous sailor-man with the bulging forearms to defeat his bellicose rival Bluto in an underwater scrap as their mutual sweetheart, Olive Oyl, tussles with an octopus named Salty Sam. But tricky becomes torturous when the tentacular beast refuses to budge.

"The special effects just didn't do the job," says Stephen Altman, who was prop master on *Popeye* before graduating to production designer on some of his father's later films. "They ran out of money and gave us a rubber doll that didn't articulate. Shelley Duvall [as Olive] made that octopus move more than six props-men with sticks could."

That the obstinate octopus should make *Jaws*' malfunctioning shark look lively by comparison was yet another setback in a nightmarish shoot that had spiralled weeks over schedule. With *Popeye* already blighted by hazardous weather, constant script changes and intolerably rigid silicone forearms, the budget, co-financed by Paramount Pictures and Walt Disney Productions, had soared from $13 million to $20 million. Gleefully, the press had taken to dubbing Robert Evans' production 'Evansgate', a sly nod to Michael Cimino's epic Western *Heaven's Gate*, which had finished shooting just three months earlier, having spiralled to nearly four times its original budget.

"It was a crazy movie," says Stephen Altman of their time in Malta, shaking his head. "It was like a judge sentencing you to 11 months on the rock, hard labour." Unit coordinator David Levy, who later produced eight Altman movies, recalls it with a sigh. "We were there for a year," he laments. "People got sick, people were born, relationship issues became exacerbated,

Clockwise from main: Making a splash: Popeye (Robin Williams) and Bluto (Paul L. Smith) come to watery blows; Shelley Duvall, as Olive Oyl, gets tangled with Salty Sam the octopus; Director Robert Altman with a pipe-chewing Williams on set.

addictions became worse. I don't want to make it sound like a living hell..." He tails off, flickering between a grin and a grimace. "Though at times it certainly qualified."

IN 1977, EVANS WANTED TO ADAPT beloved comic strip *Little Orphan Annie*, a desire fuelled by that year's success of the all-singing, all-hoofing Broadway smash, *Annie*. With *Love Story*, *The Godfather* and *Chinatown* to his name, Evans was the rock-god producer of New Hollywood, the guy who 'got' the beardy-weirdy young artists who had reinvented the industry. He was used to getting his own way, but Paramount Pictures lost a bidding war to Columbia Pictures, spurring Evans to meet with executives to discuss which comic-strip characters Paramount already owned the rights to.

Popeye was suggested. The spinach-swilling, corn-cob-pipe-chewing sailor man created by E.C. Segar was, after all, an American hero, quickly becoming the lead in the daily King Features comic strip *Thimble Theatre*, after debuting as a supporting character on 17 January 1929. And while King Features Syndicate retained the television rights — animated series *The All New Popeye Hour*, co-produced with Hanna-Barbera, was about to start airing on CBS — Paramount owned the theatrical rights, having churned out a string of Max Fleischer-adapted animated shorts between 1933 and 1957.

At that time, in 1977, David Levy worked for Hollywood super-agent Sam Cohn. Levy recalls *Popeye* sitting on Cohn's desk, with Mike Nichols attached to direct and Dustin Hoffman tagged as the lead — a reunion of the *Graduate* dream team. It was the start of a game of musical chairs: John Schlesinger (*Midnight Cowboy*) replaced Nichols; Hoffman departed due to creative differences with cartoonist/scriptwriter Jules Feiffer (*Carnal Knowledge*); Schlesinger exited, leading to directors Hal Ashby and Arthur Penn entering the conversation. "And that's when Sam inserted Altman's name," says Levy. "It was a daring thing to do, because at that point Altman was coming off a five-picture deal with Fox, and none of them were commercially successful. But over a period of time, with a lot of salesmanship, it gained traction."

A year later, Levy was working for Altman, and *Popeye* was a go. Altman relished the chance to make a tentpole musical — he chimed with the comic-strip's anarchic sensibilities and possessed a deep passion for music — and he got his way in casting, starting with *Mork & Mindy* star Robin Williams in the title role.

"[The studios] were afraid to put a television actor in a picture this big," Evans told writer Mitchell Zuckoff for his 2009 book, *Robert Altman: The Oral Biography*. "Using a television star in those days to play a lead role in a movie was not *au courant*... But nobody could have played it better than Robin." Williams was thrilled to be making his movie debut as Popeye, telling the *Savannah Morning News* in 2013, ›

"It was a great script written by Jules Feiffer based on the Segar cartoons and the comic strip, which is really wonderful. He's such a great, crusty character, and an orphan, and the whole idea of finding his Pappy... All that stuff he mumbles is pretty nasty." Filling out the principal cast, Altman's great acting discovery, Shelley Duvall, would go straight from *The Shining* into her seventh Altman film as Olive Oyl ("I said, 'This is who I'm using or I'm not doing it,'" Altman told the execs when they pushed for Lily Tomlin or *Saturday Night Live*'s Gilda Radner); Paul L. Smith, who played the vicious prison guard in *Midnight Express*, signed on as Bluto; and Altman-favourite Paul Dooley (*A Wedding*, *A Perfect Couple*, *HealtH*) was cast as Popeye's burger-chomping pal Wimpy.

"When we started [in 1978], we were really excited," says Stephen Altman. "*Superman* had been done, so there was a precedent. And everyone involved was so talented, starting with Bob Evans bringing it to Bob [Altman]. Then Jules Feiffer, with the script — his comics are some of the best. And [singer-songwriter] Harry Nilsson — it's like, 'Oh my God!' And then the casting started. When Robin came up, we thought, 'We've got it.' And we had Olive Oyl in our pocket." He offers a small, rueful smile. "Yes. We were very excited."

Before long, though, the thrills would give way to spills.

This page, top to bottom: "I yam what I yam!"; Duvall as Oyl. **Facing page, top to bottom:** Enjoying the view; The ramshackle village of Sweethaven, built by the production at Anchor Bay in Malta; The set still exists today, renamed Popeye Village; Baby Swee'Pea (Wesley Ivan Hurt); Salty Sam: you wouldn't like him when he's angry; Popeye and Poopdeck Pappy (Ray Walston).

THOUGH MOST OF THE WATER work was shot on the ocean, Malta was chosen to house *Popeye* because it boasted an infinity tank (a large water tank that creates the illusion of an endless body of water) — and because it was 8,000 nautical miles from any interfering execs based in Los Angeles. Filming began on 23 January 1980. Fellini's favourite cameraman, Giuseppe Rotunno, was DP, and most of the madcap action was to be set in the whimsical fishing hamlet of Sweethaven. It is here that Popeye alights from a rowing boat to take a room at the Oyls' boarding house, and the plot strands that then unfurl — Popeye and Olive coming to care for foundling Swee'Pea (Altman's grandson Wesley Ivan Hurt); Popeye searching for his long-lost father Poopdeck Pappy (Ray Walston); a half-hearted hunt for sunken treasure — are as ramshackle as the higgledy-piggledy set.

"It took months," says production designer Wolf Kroeger, who oversaw the build of 19 establishments, including a hotel, schoolhouse, post office, store and tavern. His crew of 165 sank eight tons of nails and 2,000 gallons of paint into the construction. "I was in Malta for over a year," he continues. "A lot of material came from Europe. The shingles came from Canada and didn't arrive until the week before shooting. My construction crew was Italian. We hardly talked. Lots of drawings. The Italians are great sculptors."

So great, in fact, their designs remained inch-perfect even after Kroeger had confiscated their tape measures and spirit levels. "I didn't want it to be a stiff thing, you know? I wanted it to be slightly cartoonish. No perfect buildings." The finished set was as lop-sided as Popeye's grin as it clung to the hilly terrain of Anchor Bay on Malta's north-west coast. It remains there now, renamed Popeye Village. "They use it as a tourist thing and they've fucked it up," spits Kroeger. "It doesn't look like it was, and they've painted weird colours. I took my kids. They wanted me to pay an entrance fee, so I didn't go in."

Sweethaven, then, was a sloping, slanting, sinking miracle of design. Less pliant were Popeye's silicone forearms. Weighty and inflexible, Williams could not wear them. He performed the opening scenes of the movie cloaked by a raincoat, and started referring to the set as 'Stalag Altman', though he got on well with the director.

But those pesky forearms were no laughing matter. Evans phoned every effects man in Hollywood. No dice. Thankfully, expert craftsman Romolo Felice, based in Rome, stepped up. "I had very little time because the filmmaking was in progress," he remembers. "I made a single-piece mould. By pouring latex

Alamy, Imago, Shutterstock

rubber inside the mould, I got soft and flexible arms without junction marks. The hairs were threaded with thin needles from the inside." He made ten pairs of arms in a week and shipped them to Malta. Williams loved them. He couldn't get enough — literally. "After many shots, the arms were no longer suitable and then the actor wore new ones," recalls Felice. "We made about a hundred pairs."

As one problem was solved, others arose. Rumours of cocaine on the set were rife, and in May this year, in an interview promoting his autobiography, ex-Paramount chairman Barry Diller said, "You couldn't escape it. Film cans would be sent back to LA for processing. And we found out the film cans were actually being used to ship cocaine back to the set. Everyone was stoned." Meanwhile, ferocious weather cost the production three weeks. "That was really poor planning, to save all the water work for hurricane season," shudders Stephen Altman. "My dad wanted to do everything real. We went down to the docks every day at 6.30am and stood there and watched the boats jump up and down. At 2pm we would call it a day."

Altman's quest for authenticity saw him also ditch much of Feiffer's script in search of a looser, more improvisational feel, and strip back Nilsson's gloriously wonky, ragtime-flavoured score. In place of show-stopping set-pieces and dubbed vocals, he wanted muted musical numbers, sung live.

Levy winces. "The demo tape is incredible, unbelievable, astonishing, mind-blowing, genius, *classic*. And Bob decided to turn it into some kind of an awkward-shuffle of a musical. I think that might have been the difference between real box-office success, and not."

"It just shouldn't have been done live," agrees Stephen Altman, citing how even acclaimed musical-theatre actor Ray Walston, playing Pappy, found it a struggle. "Ray, who could barely hold that pipe in his mouth, had to sing live, on a boat, rocking on water. Shelley did the good one (*plaintive love ballad 'He Needs Me'*) because they were on land and isolated. We put sound barriers up. But my dad was, 'Shoot it live, and whatever accidents happen, that's it.'"

POPEYE OPENED ON 12 DECEMBER 1980, less than a month after *Heaven's Gate*. In May, when *Popeye* was in post, Evans had pleaded guilty to a misdemeanour charge of possession of cocaine, and those 'Evansgate' headlines swelled faster than the movie's budget. The reviews rubbed sea-salt in the wounds. "Cluttered, squawky, and eerily unfunny," wrote celebrated critic Pauline Kael. *The New York Times*' Vincent Canby, meanwhile, noted that Williams offered an "inhibited impersonation", and the singing voices sounded "dim and distant". There were admirers who argued that the movie's rough-edged spontaneity was true to both the original comic-strip and Altman's body of work, but they were in the minority. So while Roger Ebert praised Popeye's "level of high comedy and high spirits", most critics were, as Popeye would say, disgustipated, and could only find a positive in Duvall's spot-on portrayal of string-bean Olive Oyl. As Altman himself would later say, "She's the best thing in that film. She's perfect."

Sadly, Williams' vivid performance was not afforded the same respect, and he rarely talked about the film later on. "He seemed reluctant to own *Popeye*," notes Levy. "He was almost apologetic about it. I'm sorry, but for all its flaws, the movie is nothing to apologise for, and his performance is nothing to apologise for. Both are brilliant at times." When Williams talked about it in *Rolling Stone* in 1988, he shared how he strived to emulate the distinctive mutterings of Jack Mercer, the voice of the Popeye in Fleischer's cartoons. "I had to dub that movie over twice... because people couldn't understand what I was saying," he said. "I sounded like a killer-whale farting in a wind tunnel."

Popeye took $60 million at the worldwide box office — three times its budget — but was perceived as a flop, given *Superman* had soared past the $300 million mark. Altman retreated from Hollywood for more than a decade, opting to trade studio pictures for filmed plays. And though he bullishly declared that this migration was exactly as he wanted it ("I'd say it was a step up," he can be seen growling in 2014 documentary *Altman*), his son speaks to the pain he witnessed. "It crushed him," says Stephen Altman. "He stopped doing movies. He couldn't get a job. They still offered him 'M*A*S*H 2', of course. I was like, 'Dad, c'mon, we need the money.' And he was like, 'I can't do it, it will ruin my career.' What career?"

Altman made a triumphant return to the big screen in 1992 with Hollywood satire *The Player*, launching a new chapter in his career that included *Short Cuts* and *Gosford Park*. By the time of his death in November 2006, the needle of critical consensus on *Popeye* had begun to twitch, and it continues to swing as *Popeye* celebrates its 45th anniversary. Fans include Paul Thomas Anderson (who lifted Duvall's 'He Needs Me' for *Punch-Drunk Love*) and Phil Lord, who credits it as a big influence on the *LEGO* and *Spider-Verse* films ("I had a tape of *Popeye* that I watched, like, a billion times," he said in 2016). And in a cinematic landscape where special-effects-driven comic-book movies have become de rigueur, *Popeye* is increasingly praised for its idiosyncratic personality, bristling vitality and practical magic.

"It pleased him," says Stephen Altman of his father living to see opinion on *Popeye* begin to change. "If you gave him a bad review: 'Oh, ignore that, it doesn't mean anything.' Give a good review: 'Oh, that guy's really smart.' He loved all of his movies and he loved the failures even more because he never considered them a failure. He was just, 'It's too soon for you.'"

What was it that Popeye sang? "I yam what I yam." And while Altman's Popeye perversely doesn't like to eats his spinach, he sure is proving strong to the finish.

final cut

SPOILER WARNING

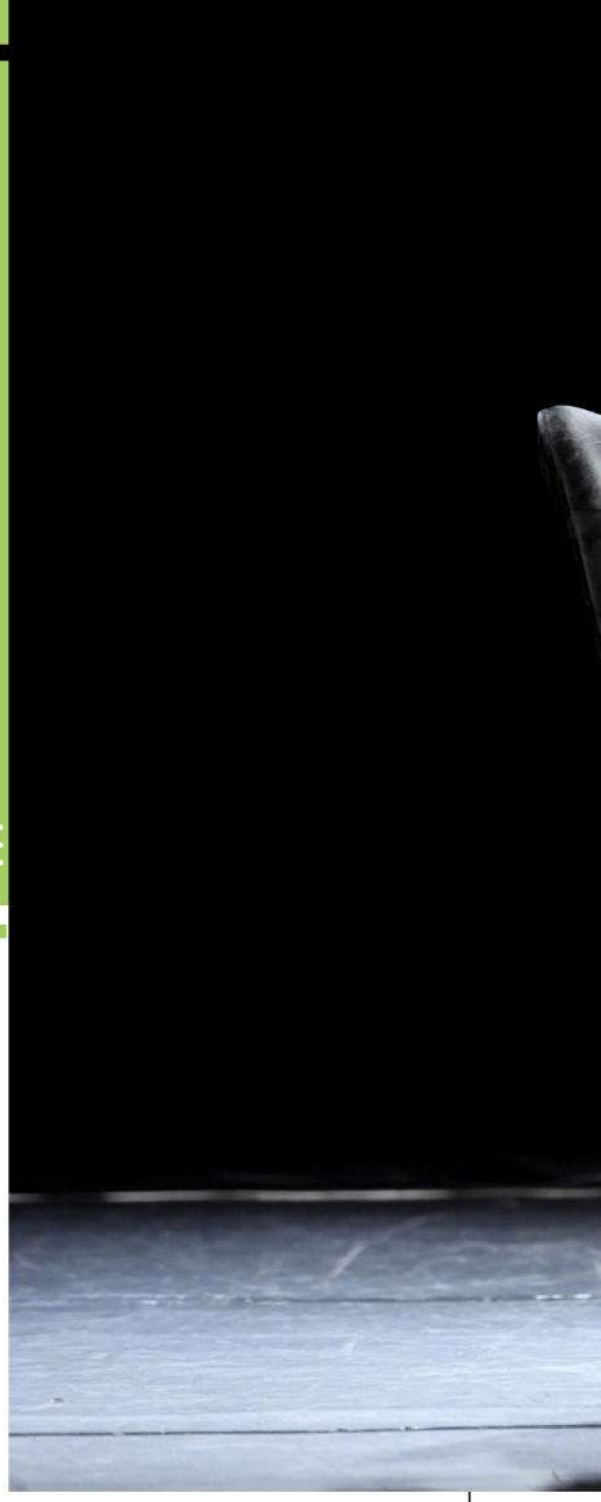
A FRESH LOOK AT HOME ENTERTAINMENT

SEPTEMBER 2025 | EDITED BY **CHRIS HEWITT**

Back from the brink

IN 2023, **JEREMY RENNER** ALMOST DIED. HE TELLS *EMPIRE* ABOUT THE MOST DIFFICULT COMEBACK OF HIS LIFE

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**



JEREMY RENNER BOUNDS into the room and greets *Empire* with the enthusiasm of a man who knows that he really shouldn't be bounding into any room at all. Because just over two years ago, on New Year's Day 2023, Renner — two-time Academy Award-nominated actor, star of *The Hurt Locker* and a couple of *Mission: Impossibles*, and one of the original pillars of the Marvel Cinematic Universe as Hawkeye — had an unplanned interaction with a snowcat just outside his property near Lake Tahoe. He was, not to put too fine a point on it, crushed by the 14,000 lb monster. He suffered horrific injuries. He almost died. Hell, at one point he actually did.

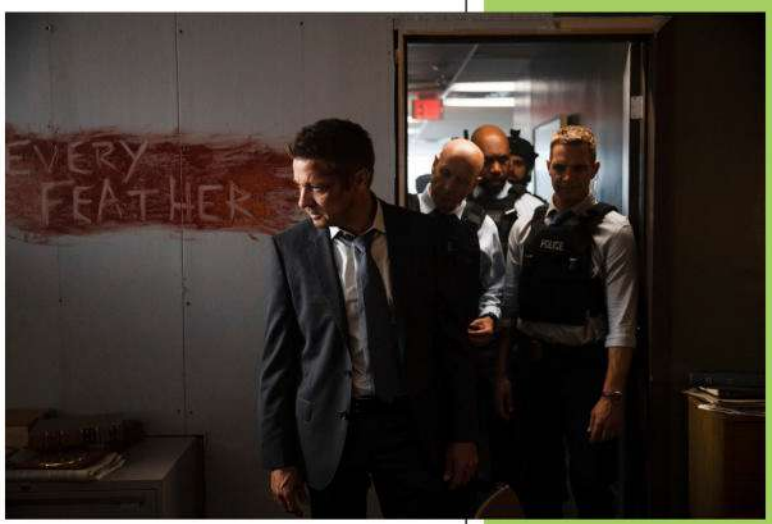
You can't keep a good Avenger down, though, and today — after a long, painful road to recovery — Renner is back in front of the camera (he's returned to his TV show, *Mayor Of Kingstown*, and will next be seen in Rian Johnson's *Wake Up Dead Man: A Knives Out Mystery*) and behind the typewriter. For he's here in London, bounding into rooms, to talk about the book he's written about his experience, *My Next Breath*. It's not your typical movie-star memoir. There are mentions of his movie and TV work, but they're brief. Otherwise, the focus is on the astonishing, moving story of that fateful day (he calls it "the incident"), its aftermath, and its indelible impact...

My first question isn't even a question. It's simply, "Jesus Christ, Jeremy Renner. Jesus Christ."

Yeah, it's something! It's brand-new to me every day, dude. It's something that lives in my cells, in my body, in my existence, all in a positive way. There are zero regrets, and only love and fortitude and vulnerability and openness and kindness. When I had to read [the book] out loud and narrate it, that was very difficult, as much as I wrote it and know the narrative. I don't mind talking about it so much. To discuss something, it keeps it alive; it's a lot to unpack, and I'm unpacking it with you as much as the next person.

Why did you write the book?

The idea of the book was always around. It's just when I got down to write, I didn't want to write it because it was just too overwhelming, and then to do it alone again, word by word, is like, "Really, have I gotta do an interpretive dance performance for you, to show you what it looked like?" But I'm so glad I got out of my own way and did the interpretive dance and wrote it word by word. My life is much more enriched because I wrote this book. And it wouldn't have happened if I didn't get out of my own way.



Above: Jeremy Renner kicks off his *My Next Breath* book tour in New York in April. **Left:** Leading the pack as Mike in *Mayor Of Kingstown*.

The book starts with, "I didn't want to write this book." Were you thinking about a great opening line?

Of course. A lot of this book came from dialogue. I would speak with people, I would talk with my family, I would talk with another writer friend, and things would come out and I'd jot them down. "The devil doesn't exist when you die" — okay, I can write a lot about that phrase. My perspective only comes from the things I learned from being tested to the nth degree, of peeking behind the curtain of life and death itself and feeling, "Oh yeah, I died." I thought I was never afraid of death; now I'm certain. So when I die again, or when anybody else dies, there's no fear wrapped around it.

You say in the book that you'll never have a bad day again. So what do you complain ›

This page, clockwise from top left: As Hawkeye, beside Robert Downey Jr's Iron Man, in *Avengers: Endgame*; Tense times in *The Hurt Locker*; Left-handed Renner masters the crossbow with his right in *Avengers Asssemble*; In cerebral sci-fi *Arrival.*

about in your life now?
I don't. There's nothing. If there's anything that's annoying, it's the reminder that my mouth, every time I close it, it just doesn't align. It'll never align. But I let it be a reminder instead of an annoyance. It's my power. It's my life. It's my fucked-up mouth. And that's the worst of it. That's the best the snowcat could do. That's all it did to me. You can't beat me. But changing the narrative is something that all of us can do.

It's a very different kind of memoir. If people were looking for the inside scoop on the *Avengers* movies, they're not going to get it. Was that something you considered doing?
No, I wanted to be very focused. I'm not trying to write about my whole life. I don't think my whole life is very interesting. Why is this interesting to people? I got crushed, why is that interesting?

Well, when you say it out loud, it sounds pretty interesting. It doesn't happen every day.
No, it doesn't. But if no news covered it, or heard of it, then I would have gotten out of this scot-free. No-one would have known. I probably wouldn't have done a couple of jobs, had to do some healing, and then I'd be back at work and no-one knows anything different.

But you talk about how it's given you a different approach to acting.
Well, it was kind of a struggle coming back to fiction, when my life is more non-fiction than non-fiction can really be. It's, "Am I gonna walk right again?", and how much brain-focus it takes to sit and stand and lie down. To exist requires so much of my mind, my attention, my focus, that to go back to work and say these lines on a page, that was bullshit. "What am I doing? I don't think I'm ready for playing make-believe yet." And then, about a year after the incident, I got to a place physically where I thought, "I'm ready to go back. I want to get back to life, I have to be social, and also get people back in their jobs." I struggled the first couple of weeks, and had a lot of people help me on the show, because I did *Mayor Of Kingstown* Season 3. I did a stunt in the second week and we were all wondering, "What's gonna happen?" And it went great, and there was a big sigh of relief. It was pretty emotional. But the decision-making is, "I'll never work again unless it's with the people I want to work with, and my family can be there, or my daughter can be there, or my friends can be there."

Were you heading that way even before the incident?
I was always wanting that. That's why I would be grumpy and dissatisfied with a career that was on fire, because I wasn't really getting to share it with anybody, except for maybe the final result of the movie. Go to the premiere and then I'd be gone again. I was doing all these amazing things, but I was doing it alone, and it was really unsatisfying. And as much as I love all the choices I made, I knew that there was gonna be an endgame, *Endgame* being one of them! I knew what I signed up for, but there was a loneliness in it. And I don't get to take any of that with me. I didn't see any of my career, or my jobs, when I died.

So no highlight reel?
Nothing. Not one clip. Nothing, dude. It was all just the love experiences that I had. So I'll continue to water that garden with the people I love. I took 15 family members last summer to shoot *Knives Out* in London, and I only did it because I could bring them all. I like Rian Johnson and everybody in the movie, of course, but that was already there, and I'll really do it

Getty Images

Here, top to bottom: Action licks in *The Bourne Legacy*; Alongside Tom Cruise in *Mission: Impossible — Ghost Protocol*; With Amy Adams in *American Hustle*.

"I'm more than 150 per cent of what I was prior to the incident."

now because my family can come out and be with me. I refuse to be, or allow myself to be, away from them, and that is one of the greater gifts.

***Knives Out* fascinates me, because you're not playing Jeremy Renner in that, even though Jeremy Renner exists in the world of Benoit Blanc.**
Yeah, the hot sauce! (*Renner's face appears on a bottle of 'Renning Hot!' in* Glass Onion.) That's pretty awesome. It's so funny. I remember I got the call: "Hey, man, we want to do this hot-sauce thing." I love hot sauce and I love hot things. And then, like, "Do you really want to make your own hot sauce?" "Yeah, let's really make one." Netflix want to do a little documentary on that, on making the hot sauce. We're going down the road on it, but I really wanted to actually make it and have my own hot-sauce line. A small batch. But it was such an honour to be part of the movie without being part of the movie, and then funny to get invited to the third one as a character in it, but obviously not as me.

Did you have the conversation with Rian? "If I'm not me, then who the hell am I?"
Look, it's a comedy. In that universe, they can do whatever the heck they want.

The first time I interviewed you was the day you got nominated for an Oscar, for *The Hurt Locker*. That was a life-changing moment for you. Is that something that you look back on, even with this changed perspective of yours, with pride?
Yeah, for sure. Even before the nomination we spent a year, a year-and-a-half, with that movie, going army base to army base to spend time with soldiers and civilians. I've seen it through all the way probably once, but I saw the last ten minutes of that movie a thousand times, because I had to do discussions about it with a group of people. It's quite an effective ending. It affected a lot of people's lives in a real way. Some movies just don't do that. And then it got all the praise, and all the nominations, and all the wins, and then there's the David and Goliath story with her [Kathryn Bigelow's] ex-husband [James Cameron], and it was the biggest-grossing movie ever against the lowest-grossing. And she was the first woman to ever win. It's this fairy-tale Cinderella story, but it wasn't overnight. We shot the movie in 2008, and it didn't come out until 2010. And then you're on the Oscar train and going to all the festivals, and parading around in tuxedos and shaking hands with people.

I also remember that interview with you so well because you told me that you had just met with Marvel about playing Hawkeye. Then, a few months later, you're on the set of *Thor*, in a bucket up a crane, pointing a bow and arrow at something that's not there.
Yeah! By the way, it's right-handed too (*Renner is left-handed*). I'm shooting this arrow right-handed, it's not the right way, it's a compound bow — it's not easy to pull this thing. I'm trying to look like I know what I'm doing. It was just kind of thrown together.

Are you done now with *Hawkeye*? Is Clint Barton in your rearview mirror?
I'm always happy to be in that world, man. I love all those guys, I love the character. I'm sure we'll end up doing Season 2, and do other things. And I'm happy to do it. My body's getting ready for something like that. I don't know if anybody wants to see me in tights, but my body will look good in the tights.

After everything you've been through, could you do that stunt in *Avengers* where you jump off the roof and fire your arrow in one movement?
Absolutely. No problem. That's where I'm at. I'm more than 150 per cent of what I was prior to the incident. My health and wellbeing is an essential part of my life. I only worked out to prepare for a role. Otherwise, I hated it. And I did so many jobs, I was never getting a break. So whenever I could schlub off, I'd schlub off and all of a sudden, "Oh jeez, I'm Fat Hawkeye." But having health and wellness be such a central part of my life, that's what's gotten me back. And even as I age, I just feel stronger than I've been. I have some issues, and tendon issues and certain limitations of flexibility and mobility, but I spent a lot of time on getting better and stronger, and I wouldn't if I didn't get crushed.

The book is called *My Next Breath*, and it's abundantly clear why. But did you consider alternative titles?
Nothing came close, man. There was 'Sticks And Stones'...

'The Hurt Locker'?
Yeah! 'Still Hurtin''. But nothing came close. It [*My Next Breath*] zoomed out thematically to so many themes I wanted to talk about. It all existed on my next breath. Nothing else matters. You have to exhale, then you inhale, then you exhale, then you're breathing. Otherwise it's just an inhale, right? You gotta put one foot down, then another foot, then you can start walking. But you can't walk unless you put a foot down on the ground.

***MY NEXT BREATH* IS AVAILABLE NOW IN HARDBACK AND ON KINDLE AND AUDIOBOOK**

SPOILER SPECIAL

The Accountant 2

GAVIN O'CONNOR ON THE KEY MOMENTS OF HIS SEQUEL

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

IT'S TAKEN ALMOST a decade for Gavin O'Connor to make a sequel to *The Accountant*, his slick 2016 thriller that saw Ben Affleck play Christian Wolff, an autistic assassin who also happens to be one of the world's greatest accountants. Or is that an accountant who also happens to be one of the world's greatest assassins? Either way, the follow-up — imaginatively titled *The Accountant 2* — dials back the action and dials up the character work and comedy. "I think it's better than the first, but probably just because it's fresher in my bloodstream," O'Connor tells *Empire*. Here, he talks us through the film's twists and turns...

RIP RAY

The movie begins with a bang, and something of a shock, as J.K. Simmons' former Fed, Ray King, an ally of Christian Wolff, is unceremoniously bumped off. "I had to make that call to J.K. and apologise," admits O'Connor. "He wasn't thrilled about dying in the first ten minutes, but you kneel at the altar of the movie. It makes it personal for Chris. I just thought, 'I gotta come out with a fucking bang here.' The whole seven-minute-long sequence, in which Ray holds his own against some goons before being shot, is soundtracked by a version of the Nina Simone song 'See-Line Woman'. "I always had that in my head for the scene," says O'Connor. "It had a beat and a rhythm that I really liked, to set up the movie."

DATES NIGHT

Most action movies would introduce their unstoppable hero in one-man-army mode. Here, though, we're reintroduced to Christian at a speed-dating night, one he's gamed to try to find romance. It fails miserably, but hilariously. "I saw a TED talk with this planetary-brain intellectual who actually hacked into a dating site and really did this," laughs O'Connor. "So I said to Bill [Dubuque, writer of both movies], 'We have to do a version of this.'" Which saw Affleck riffing with a succession of actresses. "I said to my casting director, 'I need them to have some kind of improv background.' The girls were fucking great. Some of them were like, 'What the fuck did this guy just say?' It's exactly right for the scene."

BRAXTON'S BRIEFS

In the first movie, Jon Bernthal's Braxton was introduced as a slick, fast-talking rival assassin. It was only in the final moments that it was revealed that Braxton was actually Christian's younger brother, with the two ultimately teaming up. Here, Braxton's grand entrance reveals him as something of a neurotic mess, ranting in his pants in a Berlin hotel room as he

tries to work up the courage to talk to a woman. About a dog. "The scene as written was, he walks into the penthouse suite, he opens up a box, there's a gun inside, he makes a phone call," says O'Connor, "and Jon and I just kept saying, 'There's more to this scene.'" So O'Connor and Bernthal improvised ideas. The result is what you see now. Not that Bernthal needed much persuasion to get into his tighty-whities. "He was game, man. He was very happy to do it." If you looked like Bernthal, you'd be game too.

UP ON THE ROOF

"There were two times in the movie where I just wanted to say goodbye to the plot," says O'Connor. The first was Braxton in Berlin. The second comes when Christian and Braxton have a contentious but ultimately cathartic conversation on the roof of Christian's Airstream home. "They're kind of working out their shit," says O'Connor. "I was rolling two cameras at once. It's a long scene — there's a lot of territory to cover until it all starts to emerge. Brax can cover with his bravado all he wants, but he's a lonely soul, just like Chris is."

WALK THE LINE DANCE

As well as a heart-to-heart, O'Connor wanted the brothers to have a fun scene together, but was drawing a blank. Until he got a call from Dubuque, who had just been to a wedding and had witnessed some line dancing. "You can actually do the mathematics of line dancing," says O'Connor, which is why he decided it would be a perfect fit for Christian. And that's why there's a scene in which Ben Affleck dances. Although that scene ends with the promise of a huge bar brawl between the brothers and a bunch of angry rednecks, O'Connor never shows it. "We didn't have the budget to shoot the fight," laughs O'Connor. "Even if I shot the fight, everyone knows how it's going to end. There's no way they're losing."

DO THE TWIST

Throughout the film, Daniella Pineda is a striking presence as Anaïs, a mysterious assassin who is somehow tied up with a missing Mexican immigrant called Edith Sanchez. In a shock twist, it's revealed that Anaïs *is* Edith, face reconstructed and memory missing after a car crash. "These fucking puzzle plots are really hard to do, and you have to do it because otherwise you don't need Chris," says O'Connor, who signposts the twist from the opening sequence, where Ray King meets Anaïs and presents her with a photo of Edith. "Ray had it all figured out. But I don't know that everyone gets that. I understand if they don't have it in one sitting, because it's fucking complicated."

AN UNEXPECTED SHOWDOWN

With federal agent Marybeth (Cynthia Addai-Robinson) edging ever closer to the truth, the film's true villain (Robert Morgan's Burke) puts out a hit on her. The contract is taken by Anaïs, leading to a brutal fight between the two. Initially, that was meant to be a dust-up between Anaïs and Christian. "Marybeth was more the damsel in distress," says O'Connor. "And I said, 'Dude, I don't want to watch a guy beat up a woman.' I had no interest in that. Let's give it to Marybeth. She earned it. Let her fight for her life. So we turned that one upside down."

BROTHERS IN ARMS

O'Connor unleashes the brothers as they race to Juarez to stop the bad guys from executing a group of kidnapped children. "Initially, I wanted that to all be at night. Because who the fuck would ever go in the daytime?" says O'Connor. However, budget issues forced his hand. "But I figured if I can amp it up and they're going to kill the kids in the daytime, now you [Chris and Brax] have no choice." With *The Accountant 3* on the docket, the brothers will have a chance to put more red in their ledgers before too long.

***THE ACCOUNTANT 2* IS OUT NOW ON PRIME VIDEO**

The Ranking

Best Animated Feature Oscar-winners

FOUR *EMPIRE* WRITERS. 24 FILMS. ONE HIGHLY ANIMATED CONVERSATION

Marco Vittur

RUSSELL MOORCROFT

OUR CRITICS

CHRIS HEWITT
Our version of Anton Ego, without the talent.

HELEN O'HARA
She's not bad. She's just drawn that way.

BEN TRAVIS
Let's talk about *Shrek*, baby.

JAKE CUNNINGHAM
The grand poobah of all things Ghibli.

Chris: So, then, the Best Animated Feature category at the Oscars, a category that was introduced in 2001. Is it one you're on board with?

Helen: I'm on board with celebrating animated movies, but I'm very conscious of the fact that this was really meant to ghettoise animation and prevent it from bringing down the tone in the Best Picture category.

Ben: I think it's a good thing overall. I'm pleased to see the conversation changing around the category, because it was dismissed by a lot of people as 'and now for all the films your kids watched', which feels insulting to the medium.

Jake: In the first 15 years of this, you could put a bet on it being a Disney or a Pixar. Now it feels like it's anyone's game.

Chris: If you win five European Cups, you get to keep the trophy. It felt like Pixar was doing that. But the first winner was *Shrek*.

Ben: It's a great film, genuinely. As a kid, when *Shrek* came out it was just the funniest thing I'd ever seen. I was so intrigued to go back and watch it again. I was surprised at how well it holds up. It's a game-changer.

Chris: I don't think it's going to trouble the top ten, though. Why is that? Has it lost cultural significance?

Jake: It's almost become a bit of a joke. It was this great dissection of what Disney did, parodying it while actually being entertaining and emotional in its own right. But now *Shrek* is a meme.

Helen: I didn't love *Shrek* at the time. I would have gone for *Monsters, Inc.*. I appreciate that *Shrek* is funny, but I don't love the animation style. I don't love how it looks. What it led to was a lot of cheaply made animated films that prioritised cheap laughs.

Chris: *Spirited Away* won in 2002. More-or-less straight out of the gate with a Miyazaki.

Jake: It's not my favourite Miyazaki at all. But I think it's a phenomenal piece of animation. I don't think it's his strongest story.

Chris: It's batshit insane.

Helen: In a good way.

Chris: I like batshit insane. I embrace batshit insane. As a result of Pixar's dominance, and everyone trying to emulate Pixar, we got a lot of cookie-cutter stuff. What I love about this, and *The Boy And The Heron*, is that they're like nothing else.

Ben: I picked *The Boy And The Heron* over *Spirited Away*. It has the added emotional punch of where it sits in Miyazaki's filmography, in that it's very possibly his last film. It's more personal.

Helen: If *My Neighbour Totoro* were on this list, we're having a different conversation. *Spirited Away* is very high for me. I love the ambition, the weirdness.

Jake: I'm with Ben, I prefer *The Boy And The Heron*.

Chris: After *Spirited Away* we move into the Pixar era of dominance. It won six of the next eight in this category — *Finding Nemo*, *The Incredibles*, *Ratatouille*, *WALL·E*, *Up*, and *Toy Story 3*. Where do you even begin?

Helen: *Finding Nemo* very much hews to what was beginning to be the Pixar formula: two mismatched buddies have to do a thing. But it's so beautiful, it has so much heart, and a point of view about parenthood. And *WALL·E* is glorious.

Ben: I love *WALL·E* so much. It's probably still my favourite Pixar movie overall.

Jake: There's so much joy in *WALL·E*. I'm going to be one of those clichéd people that says, "It's great until people start talking." But that first half an hour or so is amazing.

Chris: The heart of the Pixar movies is why they endure so much. *Up* is my favourite Pixar movie. I still remember the tears welling up at the bottom of my 3D glasses when I first saw it.

Ben: I love how much it's remembered for that gorgeous 'married life' sequence at the beginning. But I cannot let us continue without talking about *Ratatouille* and *The Incredibles*. Until *Spider-Verse*, *The Incredibles* was the best animated action movie ever made.

Jake: They should do a live-action superhero family movie that's set in the '60s.

Ben: That would be fantastic.

Helen: For *Ratatouille*, I had two press trips to Paris for the DVD launch. I went to some of the restaurants that inspired it.

Chris: Is it on your list?

Helen: It's not. Such ingratitude, I know. It's an incredible film, but the competition in this category is strong.

Chris: I'm very lukewarm on *Ratatouille*. The first time I saw it, it left me utterly cold. I went

full Anton Ego. It was only the second time around that it charmed me, but not enough.
Helen: *Toy Story 3* beat *How To Train Your Dragon* and my beloved Toothless, but it's hard to argue with.
Ben: It does lots of interesting things, but it's not that warm, fuzzy *Toy Story* place for me. If *Toy Story 2* were on this list, it would be very different.
Chris: That Pixar run was broken by two films. *Happy Feet* — God, I hate that film. Flames, flames on the side of my face. And the wonderful *Wallace & Gromit In The Curse Of The Were-Rabbit*.
Helen: That one I have a lot of affection for. The script is off-the-charts clever, the joke rate is so high, and it's beautifully crafted.
Ben: To have some Aardman on this list is a wonderful thing. They were still mega-analogue back then, and that just makes it all the more impressive.
Chris: I gave it five stars, and that review didn't destroy my life or reputation. Great film. But the highest-grossing film in this category is *Frozen*.
Ben: This is *The Lion King* for younger Gen Zs. But *Frozen* is not on my list because *Frozen II* is better. And I think it's a bit weird, narratively. The songs are great, but there are too many flaws.
Chris: I wasn't swept up at the time, but it's melted me since.
Helen: It's important in the same way that I will acknowledge that *Shrek* is important. It's just not in my personal top ten.
Chris: Let's talk about another Pixar. Pete Docter's *Inside Out*.
Helen: It's a miraculous film. It's two completely different films happening on the same screen at the same time. Kids are seeing a totally different story play out than their parents.
Jake: I like *Inside Out*, but it wasn't gonna dent my ten.
Ben: It destroys me on an emotional level. Riley being born and seeing her parents and experiencing joy for the first time is one of the greatest things that's ever been put in any film and it happens in the first minute of *Inside Out*.
Chris: I don't know that there's a movie in this category that's as influential as *Spider-Man: Into The Spider-Verse*.
Ben: It is, absolutely, the biggest leap in the medium since *Toy Story*. That's how huge it is. *Spider-Verse* broke all the rules, down to the very fundamentals of animation itself, and how it was animated.
Jake: It's in my top ten more for the effect it's had on the industry than it is for the film itself. I don't feel drawn to watch it that often.
Chris: Your Ghiblis and your Cartoon Saloons and your Aardmans were already trying new things, but the mainstream studios were like, "We can do this?" And it's led to *The Mitchells Vs The Machines*, and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutant Mayhem*, and *Puss In Boots: The Last Wish*.
Helen: Even Pixar is trying to push things and experiment a little more, which is good.
Chris: I think that positive influence has been seen in this year's winner, *Flow*, which is as outside the mainstream as you could possibly get.
Jake: It's the little film that could. It's a budget of three million euros going up against $200 million films, and winning. And it's so beautiful. It's completely silent, it looks incredible. Gints Zilbalodis is going to become the voice of a new generation of animation.
Helen: It's showing that these limits that you've assumed existed do not necessarily exist. It's also a beautiful underdog story, except it's an undercat story.
Chris: Imagine how much better it would be if the cat spoke with the voice of Seth Rogen. Imagine if the last line was, "Let it flow," followed by a big laugh.
Ben: If it had, it might have made my list.
Chris: YOU LOVE *SHREK* BUT NOT *FLOW*?
Ben: I admire every single thing you guys have said about it, but —
Chris: It didn't have a green ogre.
Ben: I didn't have the ultimate viewing experience. I watched it on my laptop. I wish I'd had the chance to be overwhelmed by it on the big screen.
Chris: Alright, enough squabbling. Let's vote!

AGREE? DISAGREE?
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THE TOP TEN

1.
SPIDER-MAN: INTO THE SPIDER-VERSE (2018)

2.

FLOW (2025)

3.
WALLACE & GROMIT: THE CURSE OF THE WERE-RABBIT (2005)

4.

INSIDE OUT (2015)

5.

WALL•E (2008)

6.

UP (2009)

7.
SPIRITED AWAY (2002)

8.
RATATOUILLE (2007)

9.
THE BOY AND THE HERON (2023)

10.

TOY STORY 3 (2010)

STORY OF THE SHOT

Grease

IT'S THE ONE THAT WE WANT. OOH. OOH. OOH.

WORDS **IAN FREER**

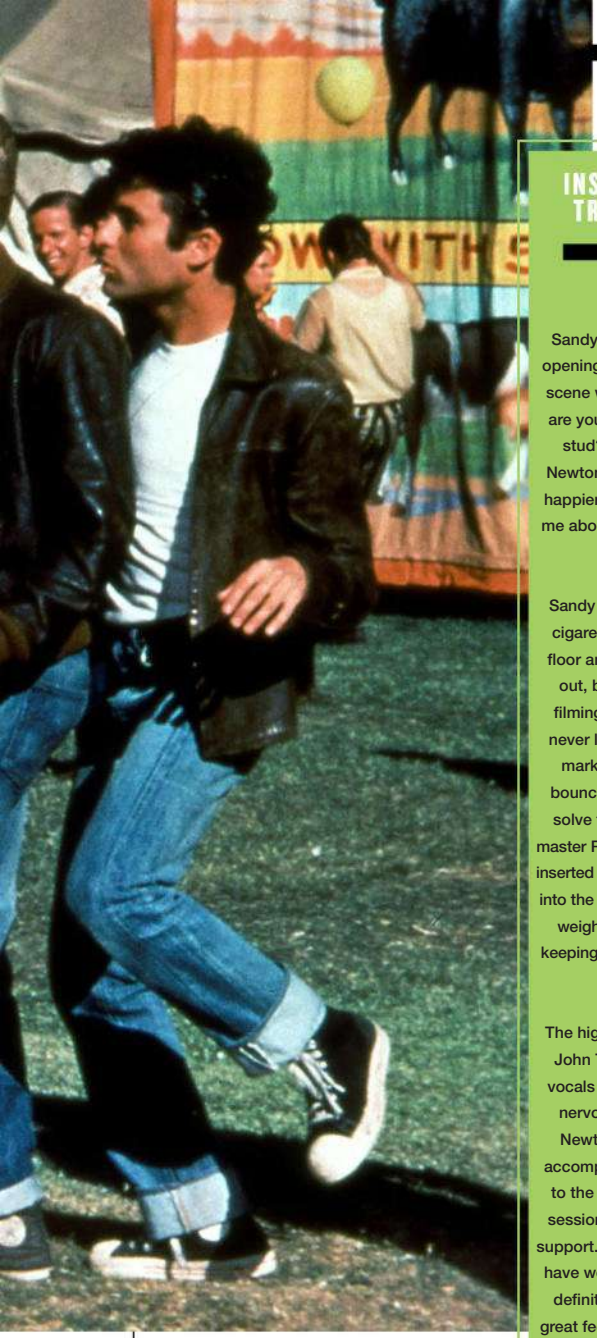
THE ORIGIN

'You're The One That I Want', perhaps the signature song — and surely the best-loved? — from Randal Kleiser's 1978, '50s-set musical *Grease*, didn't appear in the show's original Broadway production. Replacing the Elvis Presley pastiche 'All Choked Up', it was written specifically for Olivia Newton-John, penned by her favoured songwriter, John Farrar. At its heart, the sequence pivots on perhaps cinema's greatest case of crossed wires. Greaser Danny Zuko (John Travolta, then aged 23) has donned a lettered Rydell High cardigan — soon swiftly removed — to win over wholesome Aussie gal Sandy (Newton-John, 29), while Sandy has transformed into a cigarette-smoking, clad-in-black sex bomb to seduce fuckboy Danny: cue a catchy declaration of love at a carnival. A very late-in-the-day addition, Farrar "had a tight deadline — the next day — to write a song that would showcase the Bad Sandy character," recalled Kleiser. "I liked the '70s take on a driving, Eddie Cochran-like rhythm. We got it recorded right away so [choreographer] Pat Birch could rehearse with it."

THE SHOOT

The number was shot at John Marshall High School in the Los Feliz district of Los Angeles, with a carnival set up on the athletic fields. Kleiser and Birch planned out the choreography on the fly and went for it. "The movie was not expensive," said the director. "It gave us a kind of freedom to try things out and see what happened." Key to the scene is Sandy's appearance in her raunchy garb. While Newton-John wore her own red platformed shoes, costume designer Albert Wolsky used famed lingerie store Frederick's of Hollywood as reference for items such as Sandy's skin-tight spandex trousers. "I had to be stitched into those pants every morning," Newton-John recalled. "They didn't want to use a zipper. I don't remember what they had to do if I needed to pee." She did a run-through the night before, during the filming of the drive-in scenes. "I got all dressed up and walked onto the set," she said. "I had been working with the same crew for two months and they didn't know it was me. I had the best time flirting with everyone." Tell us about it, stud.

Alamy, Imago



INSTANT TRIVIA

1

Sandy's original opening line in the scene was, "How are you hanging, stud?" Olivia Newton-John felt happier with, "Tell me about it, stud."

2

Sandy drops her cigarette on the floor and stubs it out, but when filming it would never land on its mark, always bouncing off. To solve this, prop master Rich Valesko inserted a bobby pin into the cigarette to weigh it down, keeping it in frame.

3

The high range of John Travolta's vocals made him nervous — so Newton-John accompanied him to the recording session as moral support. He needn't have worried. "He definitely had a great feel for it, the way he did the chorus in particular," recalled John Farrar. "And he got, like, the little yodel that I wanted."

4

'You're The One That I Want' soundtracks a brutal fight in a car between Deadpool (Ryan Reynolds) and Wolverine (Hugh Jackman) in, er, *Deadpool & Wolverine*.

THE LEGACY

'You're The One That I Want' remains one of the biggest-selling singles of all time, estimated to have sold over 15 million copies globally (it spent nine weeks at number one in the UK, and also hit the top spot in the US, eventually garnering the prestigious 'Platinum' designation). This came as no surprise to the songwriter. "I remember feeling for the first time in my life that we had a hit on our hands," beamed Farrar. There have been numerous cover versions, from the '70s (Brit comedians Arthur Mullard and Hylda Baker) through to the '90s (Craig McLachlan and Debbie Gibson) and the 2020s (Doja Cat for a Pepsi commercial). Meanwhile, in 2019, an unknown bidder paid $405,700 for Sandy's outfit at a Beverly Hills auction. It's not just the chills that are multiplyin'.

***GREASE* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL**

Main: Sandy (Olivia Newton-John) and Danny (John Travolta) turn up the heat. **Right:** David Lowery.

SPECIAL THANKS TO...

DAVID LOWERY

THE DIRECTOR WITH MULTIPLE 'SPECIAL THANKS' TO HIS NAME

IN THE BRIEF but illustrious history of *Empire*'s 'Special Thanks To...' column, there's been one common denominator. The Special Thanker has cultivated some kind of relationship with the Special Thankee. They could be old friends. They could be family. They could be a young filmmaker and an older one, the latter assuming a mentor role. But they will have a relationship or a friendship, at least of sorts. It's not as if a Special Thanker would put a Special Thankee's name in the end credits of their movie if they hadn't even met. Right?

Wrong. Because David Lowery, the director of *The Green Knight*, *A Ghost Story* and *Ain't Them Bodies Saints*, is thanked in the credits of both of Gerard Johnstone's *M3GAN* movies, and yet the two have never actually met. "But he seems great," laughs Johnstone. "And I love his movies."

So what gives? "David Lowery is a good friend of Adam Hendricks, one of our on-set producers," Johnstone tells *Empire*. "David's a guy we call up to check in on a camera person, or a head of department, and he's always forthcoming with the information."

So there you go. Mystery solved. And this is not Lowery's first 'Special Thanks' rodeo. The American filmmaker seems to have become something of a patron saint of directors, lending his wisdom and expertise to those who need it. He's been thanked by the likes of Beck & Woods (on *Heretic*), Daniels (on *Everything Everywhere All At Once*) and Taika Waititi (on *Hunt For The Wilderpeople*, where he's given 'Very Special Thanks' status). And Ti West thanked Lowery on each entry of his *X* trilogy (*X*, *Pearl* and *MaXXXine*). "David's one of the handful of people I let into the process early," West tells us. "He's a very good sounding board." Crucially, have West and Lowery actually met? "David's a very close friend of mine," says West. "We both had our first films at SXSW, and we've been friends ever since." Thank goodness for that. Otherwise, this would have been getting weird. **CHRIS HEWITT**

THE EMPIRE MASTERPIECE

Brokeback Mountain

WHY ANG LEE'S ACHING LOVE STORY REMAINS UNQUITTABLE

WORDS **OLLY RICHARDS**

BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN IS the masterpiece nobody wanted to make.

In 1997, Annie Proulx's short story of the same name was published in *The New Yorker*. Set in 1963, it tells of Ennis and Jack, two young men who become lovers while tending sheep. The relationship cannot go home with them. Over the years, as both marry women and become fathers, they share snatched moments, never able to be together in the open.

Screenwriter Diana Ossana read Proulx's story and almost immediately bought the rights, with writing partner Larry McMurtry. Actually getting the film made would be much slower and rockier. Although Ossana and McMurtry's script was widely acclaimed, many directors turned it down. Early on, Gus Van Sant was attached to direct, for Sony, but he couldn't get a cast in place. Brad Pitt, Leonardo DiCaprio, Matt Damon and Ryan Phillippe all said no, according to Van Sant.

In a 2015 oral history for *Out Magazine*, Ossana said there was a feeling that young stars were being discouraged from committing "career suicide" by signing on for a film glibly referred to as "the gay cowboy movie". These were times when to portray a gay character, as a straight actor, was considered 'brave' and queer relationships were largely confined to arthouse cinema. Gay characters in Hollywood projects were typically sexless and either comedic or dying.

By 2001, Sony and Van Sant had moved on. In 2002, Ang Lee circled the project, but made *Hulk* instead. That turned out to be a choice so exhausting that he considered retirement, but when *Hulk* lumbered into the world in 2003, *Brokeback* was still without a director. Lee still loved the script and signed on, recruiting Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger to play Jack and Ennis. Gyllenhaal was already considered one of the industry's best new stars, but Ledger was a risk. Since his breakout in *10 Things I Hate About You,* his choices had been spotty. Films like *The Patriot* and *Ned Kelly* had failed to establish him as the leading man he was hyped to be. Maybe his natural home was cute comedies, not the weightier stuff. The studio was apparently not excited about him, but Lee and the writers pushed. It turned out to be inspired casting, the unveiling of one of the great actors of his generation.

While it's not hard to imagine a Van Sant version, it's difficult to envisage anyone making *Brokeback* the way Lee did. His film aches. A director of understatement and delicate touch, he trusts his audience to understand his characters without them necessarily articulating how they feel. *Brokeback* is primarily told in prolonged silence. The scenery almost conveys more than the dialogue. Ennis is often framed against the huge skies and broad, open terrain of Wyoming, all alone but exposed. The first time we see Jack and Ennis together, in the office of rancher Joe Aguirre (Randy Quaid), Ennis is dressed in brown and grey, the same as the walls, huddled in the darkness between two windows. Jack, contrasted in blue denim, stands a touch prouder. It tells us just who these men are. One will always retreat to the shadows; the other is prepared to be seen.

When they reach Brokeback Mountain, an Eden of roaring life compared to the dust of the world below, Lee builds Ennis and Jack's bond slowly, in fleeting brushes — Jack dabbing a wound on Ennis' temple; playground shoving after Ennis kills an elk — but when their attraction eventually exerts itself, it's with seemingly irresistible force. Ennis crawls into Jack's tent to escape the freezing weather. When their eyes meet, Jack lifts a hand to Ennis' face, seeking connection. Ennis flips Jack on his front and penetrates him, taking what he needs quickly. For the rest of their relationship, over the next couple of decades, this is how it will go. Ennis will subsist on the crumbs he'll allow himself. Jack will always reach for more.

This elegant storytelling exists all the way through. *Brokeback* is structured so time passes with huge gaps. As soon as Ennis leaves Brokeback, he's marrying Alma (Michelle Williams). Minutes later, they have children. Jack's wife, Lureen (Anne Hathaway), gets even less screen time, numbed from spirited rodeo rider to bored housewife in a few scenes. We only glimpse Jack and Ennis' happy times together, usually only joining them

Clockwise from main: Hidden love: Jack (Jake Gyllenhaal) and Ennis (Heath Ledger); Ennis with wife Alma (Michelle Williams); Lureen (Anne Hathaway) and Jack welcome their child; An irresistible connection.

Imago

as they part again, their love becoming harder to sustain but impossible to let go. But it's no mystery what's happened in those gaps. Life is moving too fast. Nobody is getting what they want. Ennis, especially, is letting it slip through fearful fingers.

This is where Ledger proves masterful casting. For most of the film, he plays Ennis as clenched, almost one sustained dark note. In contrast to Gyllenhaal's rawness, Ledger exposes little. Until the moment when Ennis visits Jack's childhood bedroom after his death and discovers the hiding place where Jack has been keeping the shirts they both wore on Brokeback, Ennis' lightly tucked inside his. The way he hugs the shirts, with no histrionics, expresses everything he's been holding in. It's a revelatory performance of immense maturity and lack of ego. Only a few roles would follow before he died in 2008.

Ossana has said that throughout its long development, many executives tried to broaden *Brokeback*, to make it a romance in which the lovers 'just happen to be gay', but that is not the film Lee made. This is an innately gay story, about self-acceptance, fear and risk. It was famously beaten to the Best Picture Oscar by *Crash*, but *Brokeback* was a commercial hit and began a change in how Hollywood treated queer stories. They didn't always have to be message movies; they could just be human. *Brokeback* ends with Ennis alone, cherishing his love for Jack. Their shirts sit entwined in his closet, to be seen by anyone who cares to open it. The final shot lingers on a window, looking out onto the Wyoming landscape, but this time it's streaked with sunshine-yellow crops, framed like a small picture on the wall. There's still a lot of unknown out there, but it doesn't look so scary as it did.

***BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL**

PICKS OF THE MONTH

CHOSEN BY **CHRIS HEWITT**

1 SINNERS

(OUT NOW, DVD/BR/DIGITAL)

Ryan Coogler's exhilarating horror-thriller is so ambitious, and packs so much into its running time (the thrill of creativity! The importance of music! Racism and cultural oppression in America! Sex!), that by the time vampires show up, it somehow makes sense. More than the sum of its many influences, this is one of the year's best films.

2 THUNDERBOLTS*

(OUT 4 AUGUST, DVD/BR/DIGITAL/DISNEY+)

Jake Schreier's MCU team-up movie didn't connect with audiences despite the 11th-hour deployment of the word "Avengers" in the marketing. Perhaps it'll find its way now that people don't have to get up off their asterisks to go see it. It deserves to, not just for its neat blend of some of the MCU's lesser lights, but for a third act far flung from the formulaic.

3 FINAL DESTINATION BLOODLINES

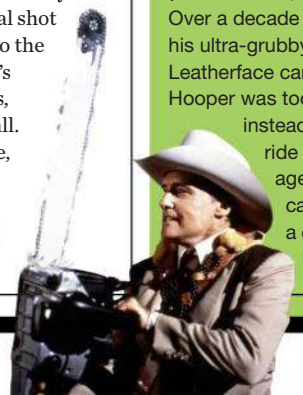
(OUT NOW, DVD/BR/DIGITAL)

The first *Final Destination* movie in 14 years surely won't be the final one, after its riotous mix of old faithfuls (incredibly elaborate Rube Goldberg-style fatal accidents) and new tricks (the opening massacre is a flashback!) made it the biggest entry in the series. And rightly so, as directors Zach Lipovsky and Adam B. Stein fully embrace the franchise's comedic side. We imagine genital-piercing numbers took a sharp dive after this.

4 THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE 2

(OUT 4 AUGUST, 4K BR)

Over a decade after redefining horror with his ultra-grubby original, Tobe Hooper and Leatherface came back for some more. But Hooper was too canny to try for a mere redo, instead conjuring up a wild, sleazy ride that has only improved with age. And just when you think it can't get any more gonzo, there's a chainsaw duel involving Dennis Hopper (left). Rev it up.

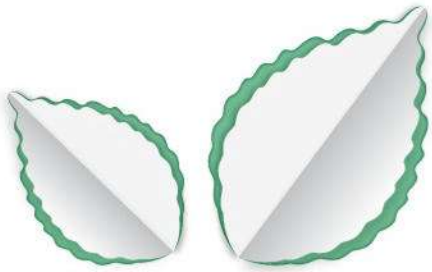


Emon and Co

The Founder of Emo Music

Check out 'Emon and Co' on all good music Internet pages, including Spotify and download sites. Emon and Co Topic on YouTube.

Coco from Fragma makes a guest appearance on Dawns and Space Travel.



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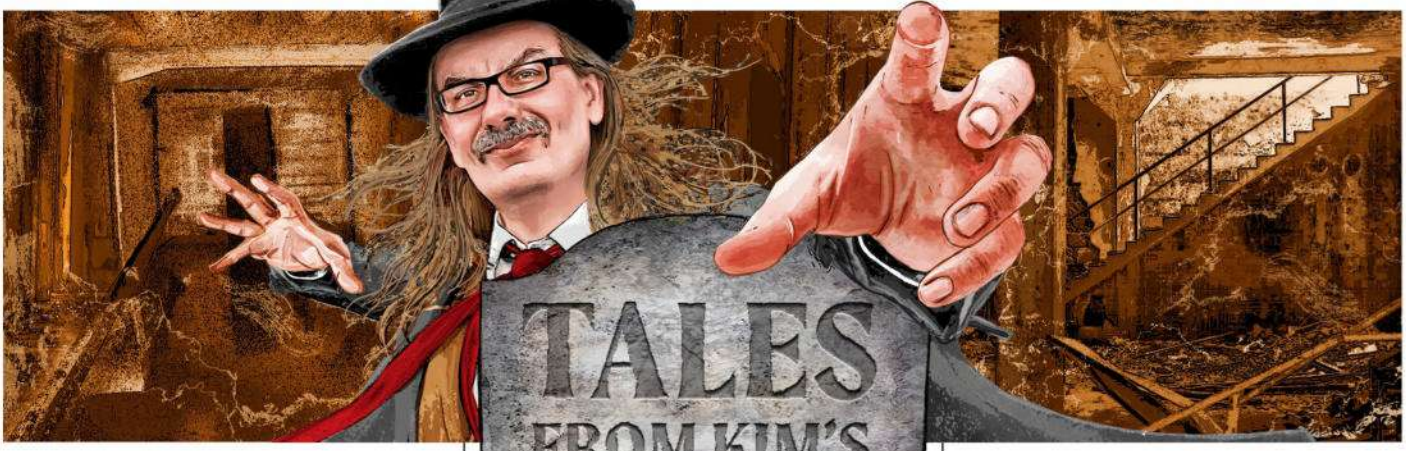


TALES FROM KIM'S CRYPT

LEGENDARY AUTHOR AND CRITIC KIM NEWMAN BRINGS US HIS UNIQUE TAKES ON CULT CINEMA

MATTHEW BRAZIER

THIS MONTH

NICK FROST AS HORROR STAR

IT USED TO be said that all clowns wanted to play Hamlet, then someone cast Mel Gibson as the Gloomy Dane and all bets were off. Nick Frost is a natural screen comedian, and has been working hard in scene-stealing supporting roles in the two decades (!) since *Shaun Of The Dead*. But he's always been drawn to dark stuff, even in comedies, and two recent straight-to-streaming vehicles suggest he might be a screen comic who really wants to be a horror star — and not just by playing a funny version of the Frankenstein monster in the *Monster Family* cartoon kid-flicks.

Black Cab — on Shudder — is literally a vehicle for Frost, directed by Bruce Goodison, from a script by Virginia Gilbert (with additional material by Frost). Synnøve Karlsen, who was so hateful as mean girl Jocasta in *Last Night In Soho* that you worried about her off-screen social life, shows her range as a put-upon hero — stuck with an obnoxious boyfriend (Luke Norris) who is pressuring her into marriage, she unwisely gets into a black cab with him after an uncomfortable meal. Ian (Frost), the bearish matey driver, weirdly gets into their argument and takes a detour along "the most haunted road in England", while deploying tricks — a tinted window, a stun-stick bought off the dark web —to keep the couple prisoner as a grim backstory involving the angry ghost of Maybelle Hill Road tumbles out. There have been a bunch of Uber/ride-share horror movies lately, so this could be seen as a balancing act to represent the horrors of old-school taxis, but a side-trip into ghostliness makes a refreshing change from the usual psycho-driver business — with Frost cannily alternating menace and pathos as a rage-driven thug who keeps trying to project a teddy-bear Dad image, and Karlsen putting the horrid Jocasta behind her to set out her stall as a potential romcom lead or slasher final girl.

Frost has made two films with Dutch director Steffen Haars — *Krazy House*, which hasn't shown up in the UK yet, and *Get Away*, which is streaming on Sky. *Get Away*, formerly known as *Svalta*, is a Frost script which turns around a couple of recent horror trends: the Airbnb nightmare, with a perv host spycamming the family who rent a holiday pad, and the folk-horror homage, with a Swedish island staging a festival (with animal masks and probable human sacrifice) to commemorate a historic tragedy which gave the community a dim view of outsiders. Hapless Richard (Frost) and Susan (Aisling Bea), along with their teenage kids Sam (Sebastian Croft) and Jessie (Maisie Ayres), are stuck in a groove of 'we seem to have gone on holiday in a Swedish horror film', with Frost playing in a different mode as passive, positive dimwit Dad, only for a couple of turns to bring out the beast for a funny, gruesome last act which nastily pays off on nicely laid-in clues.

Top to bottom: Nick Frost as the taxi driver from hell in *Black Cab*; On the holiday from hell in *Get Away*.

Shudder, Sky

CRYPT KEEPERS

KIM'S PICK OF THE WEIRD AND WONDERFUL

DEAD MAIL
(DIGITAL)

In the '80s, US Post Office employee Jasper (Tomas Boykin) works out where improperly addressed letters should be delivered. His latest challenge: a bloody scrawl from a kidnap victim. Writer-directors Joe DeBoer and Kyle McConaghy deliver a surprising, ingenious thriller.

INTO THE DEEP
(DVD, BLU-RAY, DIGITAL)

Scout Taylor-Compton is caught between pirates above the waves and sharks in the depths. Getting Richard Dreyfuss to do oceanography lectures is a casting coup, but Jon Seda is more fun as a seagoing rotter. The villains' heroin is ripped into by great whites — so why isn't it called 'Smack Shark'?

REBIRTH: HOME SWEET HOME
(DVD, BLU-RAY)

In Bangkok, karate-proficient William Moseley is separated from wife and daughter by a mall shooter, and fights zombie demons in a Thai computer-game limbo while his family flee possessed psychos in the shattered city. Good monsters, adequate action, basic gameplay.

THE UGLY STEPSISTER
(DIGITAL)

Emilie Blichfeldt's horror Norwegian reworking of *Cinderella* is told from the viewpoint of Elvira (Lea Myren), whose beauty regime includes a nose-straightening torture contraption and swallowing a tapeworm egg to get thin. Myren is outstanding, but a strong stomach is required.

THE WASP
(DIGITAL)

Director Guillem Morales' adaptation of Morgan Lloyd Malcolm's twisty thriller play. Morales showcases awards-worthy performances from Naomie Harris and Natalie Dormer as a posh neurotic and the one-time schoolfriend she asks to murder her husband.

Packing heat

DIRECTOR JOE CARNAHAN AND STAR JASON PATRIC TELL *EMPIRE* HOW THEY SHOT A MODERN COP CLASSIC, **NARC**

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

JOE CARNAHAN CAN'T quite pinpoint the moment when his life changed. It could have been the moment when Steven Spielberg came up to him after a preview screening of *Narc*, and told him, "I never felt safe in your movie." "I thought, 'I wanna start crying,'" laughs Carnahan. Or maybe the moment when Tom Cruise, similarly wowed after another screening, decided to come on board as executive producer, giving the film a commercial boost. "It could have been a little $3 million indie that vanished," says Carnahan. "I owe him a huge debt of gratitude for that."

Or maybe it was the moment, soon after *Narc* was released in cinemas in 2002, when Carnahan was having a catch-up with his business manager. "He said, 'We got 123 on *Narc* for residuals," recalls Carnahan. "I'm thinking, 'I can buy a pair of Jordans.' He goes, 'No, idiot, $123,000!'"

Whatever way you look at it, whichever moment you zero in on, *Narc* did change his life. A searing cop thriller in the grand '70s tradition, it pairs Jason Patric and Ray Liotta as two cops thrown together on an investigation into the death of a fellow officer. Along the way, dark truths are revealed, culminating in a showdown involving shotguns and a lot of shouting. It was vibrant, vital, and marked Carnahan — who was then 31 — as someone to watch.

It began life as a short film called *Gunpoint*, which Carnahan made at college. "I became obsessed with this idea of this investigation into a dead cop," he says. The story stayed with him, and he expanded it into a feature script, injecting a fair amount of his personal perspective. So much so that he actually didn't realise that the thread that runs through the movie, where Patric's Nick Tellis is wrestling with a crumbling marriage, was ripped from his own life. "I can look at that film and say, 'I think it's about the demise of my first marriage,'" admits Carnahan. "Being a cop and solving this murder was absolutely a placeholder for the dissolution of a relationship."

Liotta was first on board, as Henry Oak, an older detective driven by what seems at first to be thoughts of revenge. Patric, at that point, hadn't worked for three years after starring in and producing Neil LaBute's *Your Friends And Neighbors*. "I had all these offers, but none of it was interesting," Patric tells *Empire*. *Narc*, by then long since renamed, piqued his interest, and he agreed to meet with Carnahan. "And then, funnily enough, Ray Liotta was walking by the restaurant and just happened to see us in the window," says Patric. He smiles, sardonically. "Wasn't that a coincidence?"

Carnahan says it was. But the old Liotta-Carnahan pincer movement worked wonders, and soon Patric was on board as Tellis, an undercover narcotics officer haunted by his involvement in the accidental death of an unborn baby. "I thought Joe had an original voice," says Patric. "People try to make edgy movies, and I can always see the edge in quotation marks. This had an authenticity to it."

That authenticity was provided, in part, by the insalubrious squalor of *Narc*'s locations. Although it's set in Detroit, only one day was shot there, with Carnahan and Patric leaping on a plane at the end of the shoot to grab footage of

Left: Narcs Henry Oak (Ray Liotta) and Nick Tellis (Jason Patric). **Below, top to bottom:** Liotta on set with director Joe Carnahan; Grotty underpass? Check; Dodgy dealings at the auto-shop. **Right, top to bottom:** Tellis on manoeuvres; Patric and Carnahan mid-confab.

Imago

"I owe Tom Cruise a huge debt of gratitude."

JOE CARNAHAN

Patric shaking down passers-by, who had no idea he wasn't a cop. "How he didn't get shot, I don't know," laughs Carnahan.

Otherwise, the film was shot, across a breakneck 27 days, in Toronto. In February. The snow on the ground is real. "It was cold and miserable," says Patric. The auto shop where the film's climax is set has a particular place in his memory. "That was the most miserable place I've ever worked in. And then, of course, the coldest day we filmed was the chase in the beginning."

Despite its reputation, and gun-toting poster, *Narc* has relatively little action. But it starts with one of the great movie foot-chases, as Tellis hares after a suspect. Patric, who had just recovered from a leg injury, found himself racing along frozen sidewalks, and over a fence. "I had a guy who was, like, the seventh- or eighth-best Steadicam guy in Toronto," recalls Carnahan. "He does one rehearsal of the run with Jason, and he quits. So we had this guy who was Jason's stunt double, and we made him this rig and strapped it to his chest, and put a monitor in front of him. I said, 'Keep Jason in that box — that's all you gotta do.'" Carnahan thinks they nailed it in a few takes. Patric begs to differ. "I did it a lot," he deadpans. "If I slipped just once, jumping over the fence, it was all over."

That Patric was around to even shoot the foot-chase had been in the balance. Soon after filming began, the production essentially ran out of cash. Nobody was getting paid. Nobody. Carnahan remembers making a statement to his crew. "I said, 'Guys, if the money isn't here on Friday, walk. I will support you.' And for whatever reason, that galvanised the crew, and they stayed with me."

Patric had been having similar conversations in private. "I remember my lawyer saying, 'If the cheque hasn't arrived, you're just going to stop going to work,'" he says. "I remember thinking, 'If I do that, that's the end of the movie.' And I liked Joe, and regardless of how a movie falls apart, the director is going to take the blame for that. And I told them the cheque didn't arrive, and I just continued working, as did Ray." Later, Patric filed a lawsuit against the financiers, and got paid. "I got more than paid," he says.

After the film was completed, it started being seen by a Who's Who of Hollywood at private screenings at what Carnahan calls the "Bel-Air screening circuit, which is a euphemism for rich people who have a theatre in their home". From there came Cruise's interest and involvement. From there *Narc* got a decent release, which helped to build its reputation as one of the best cop thrillers of the 21st century. And from there came Carnahan's first big royalty cheque. So, 23 years later, can he remember what he spent that $123,000 on? He muses for a second. "Probably alimony," he laughs. Alimony, and a pair of Jordans.

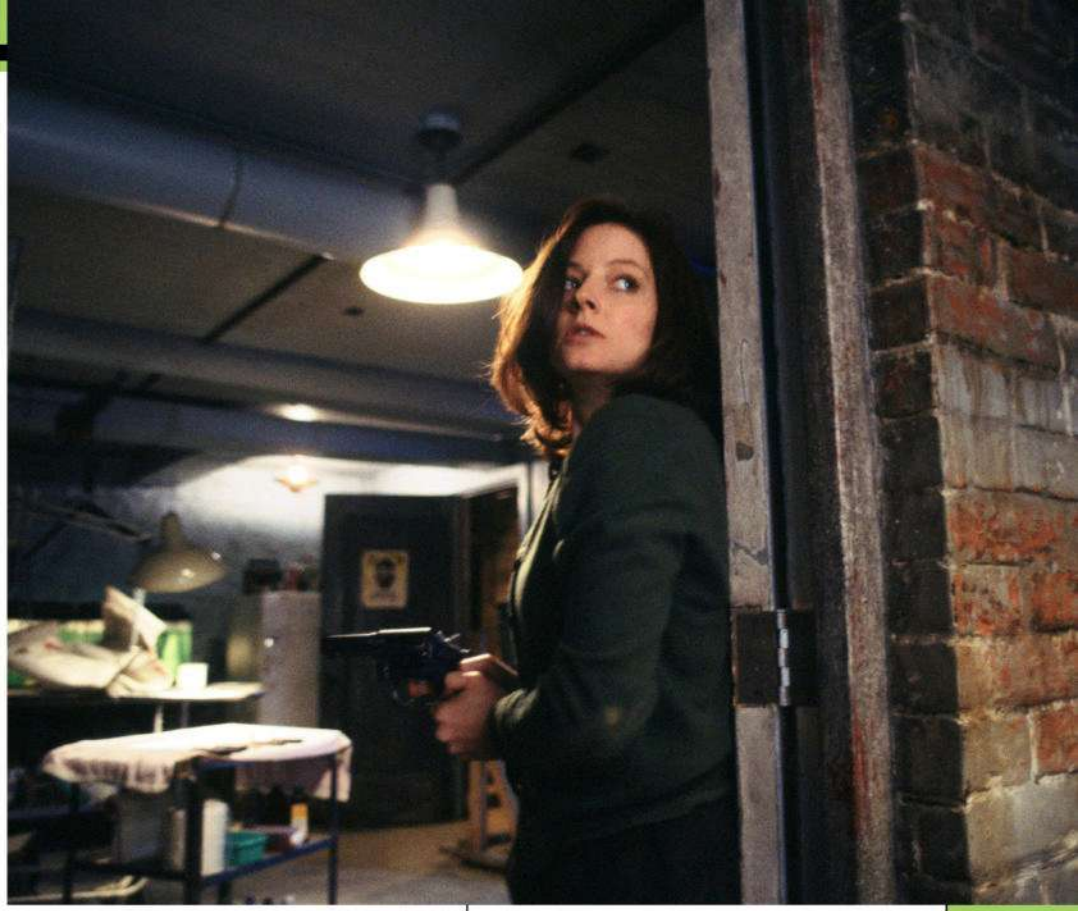
NARC IS OUT NOW ON 4K BLU-RAY

The Ultimate Empire Quiz

EVERY MONTH, WE WILL TEST YOUR MOVIE KNOWLEDGE. ARE YOU READY?

THIS MONTH

JODIE FOSTER



1 Before she appeared in *Taxi Driver*, Jodie Foster had starred in an earlier Martin Scorsese movie. What was its name?

2 Who played Sport, the pimp of Foster's child prostitute Iris, in *Taxi Driver*?

3 Foster has won the Best Actress Oscar twice. The second time was for *The Silence Of The Lambs*. What was the first?

4 Lecter, Schmecter. The serial killer Foster's Clarice Starling is really after is Buffalo Bill. Which actor played him?

5 Foster has also been nominated for Oscars on three other occasions, most recently in 2024 for Best Supporting Actress. For which movie?

6 What was the name of Foster's directorial debut, which was released in 1991?

7 She lent her voice to an animated series adaptation of *The Addams Family* in 1973. Which character did she play? Be careful: it's not who you might think.

8 She won an Emmy in 2024 for her role in the most recent season of *True Detective*. What was its subtitle?

9 Foster appeared as herself in which 2009 Uma Thurman comedy?

10 Foster starred in the original *Freaky Friday*, playing a teenager who switches bodies with her mother. Who played her mother?

11 In which 2006 movie is her character described to her face as follows: "You're a magnificent cunt."

12 Foster starred as Ellie Arroway in Robert Zemeckis' *Contact*. One of its most startling shots involves a mirror and the actress who played the young Ellie. What was her name?

13 Who played Foster's daughter in David Fincher's 2002 thriller *Panic Room*?

14 Fictional airline Aalto Airlines plays a key role in which Foster thriller?

15 Which movie is Foster's highest-grossing at the global box office — a) *The Silence Of The Lambs*, b) *Contact*, c) *Panic Room* or d) *Elysium*?

16 In which 1994 movie does she play a character called Annabelle Bransford?

17 She later directed the star of that movie in a drama about a man who communicates through a puppet. What was that called?

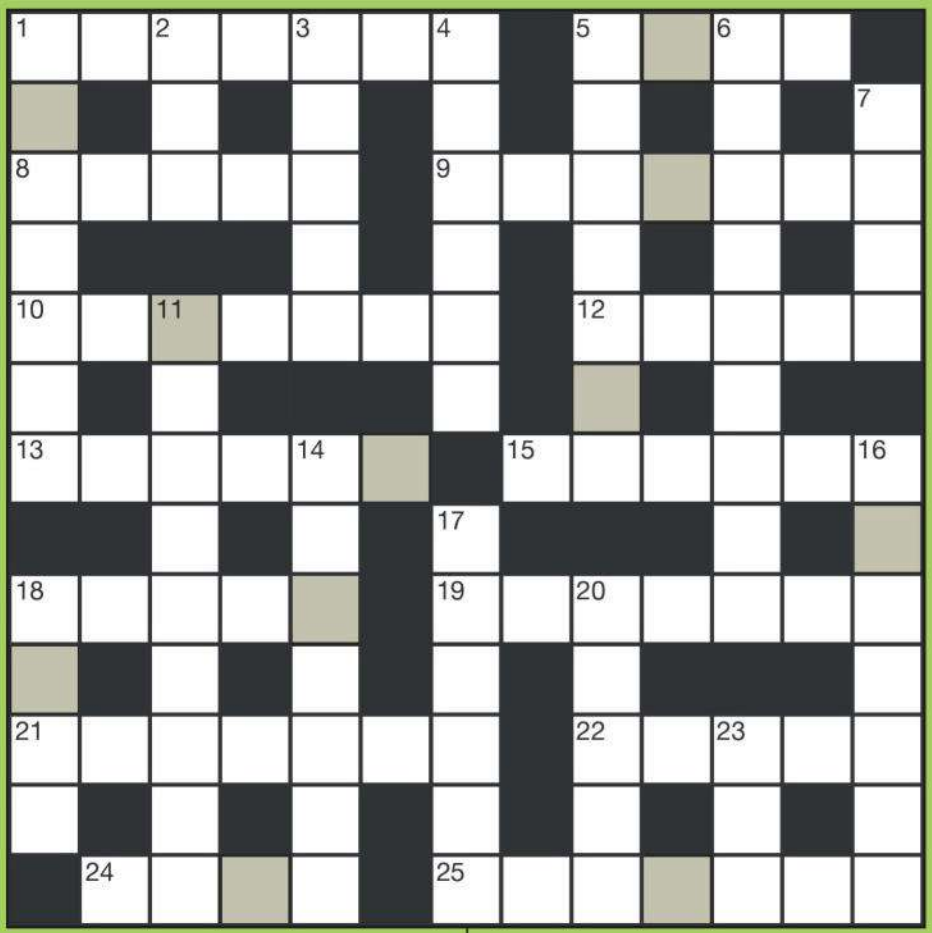
18 Who directed Foster's 2007 vigilante thriller *The Brave One*?

19 The following rules come from which Foster film: "No photography or video allowed"; "Absolutely no visitors"; "While on the premises, no fighting with or killing other patients".

20 Foster played a gangster's moll, of sorts, in Alan Parker's *Bugsy Malone* (1976). What was her name?

ANSWERS **1** *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974) **2** Harvey Keitel **3** *The Accused* (1988) **4** Ted Levine **5** *Nyad* (2023) **6** *Little Man Tate* **7** Pugsley Addams **8** *Night Country* **9** *Motherhood* **10** Barbara Harris **11** *Inside Man* **12** Jena Malone **13** Kristen Stewart **14** *Flightplan* (2005) **15** d) *Elysium*, with $286 million **16** *Maverick* **17** *The Beaver* (2011) **18** Neil Jordan **19** *Hotel Artemis* (2018) **20** Tallulah

CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1 Her films include *Legend*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* and *The Life Of Chuck* (3,4)
5 They feature in *Lady And The Tramp* and *Eight Below* (4)
8 His boat is the Orca (5)
9 Could be Alex, could be Judy (7)
10 Palpatine or Zurg, say (7)
12 How many times does Naomi Ackie blink? (5)
13 Monty, composer of the James Bond Theme — or famed TV film critic Barry (6)
15 It can describe a river or pizza (6)
18 Jason, who's been Dante Reyes, Duncan Idaho and Arthur Curry (5)
19 *The Wrath Of Khan*'s Montalbán (7)
21 She might be O'Hara or O'Sullivan (7)
22 Director Pierre, who took on *Taken* (5)
24 *If I* — (Chloë Grace Moretz film) (4)
25 Josh, from *Challengers* and the next *Knives Out* mystery (7)

DOWN

1 Film icon Steve or director Steve (7)
2/3 Down He's gone from *Hereditary* to *Eddington* (3,5)
3 See **2 Down**
4 Cate Blanchett's Hela wanted to rule it (6)
5 Arzner or Dandridge or Lamour (7)
6 "What we do in life echoes in eternity," according to one of its famous lines (9)
7 — *Of Tomorrow* (Tom Cruise movie) (4)
11 Film studio whose logo used to have the byline "A Gulf+Western Company" (9)
14 It links an aspect ratio, the Oscars and Commandant Lassard (7)
16 Ryan, whose most recent film was *Sinners* (7)
17 His name was Marlon (6)
18 Leder, who made *Deep Impact* (4)
20 A brief guest appearance in a movie (5)
23 It's an Akira Kurosawa film, or what Forrest Gump did (3)

COMPETITION

WIN!

SIZZLING TITLES ON 4K UHD

THE HOT WEATHER continues (information correct at time of going to press…), and to celebrate, we're giving away five titles on 4K UHD from the Summer's Brightest Stars promotion: Marvel Studios' *Deadpool & Wolverine* — Shawn Levy's box-office-busting action-comedy team-up; *Alien: Romulus*, Fede Alvarez's return to the *Alien* franchise's super-tense horror roots; Disney's *Moana 2*, the hugely popular swashbuckling sequel; 1999's iconic thriller *The Sixth Sense*, which freaked out audiences worldwide; and Ron Howard's beloved fantasy classic, *Willow*. To enter, simply crack the crossword, solve the anagram and follow the entry instructions below.

4K UHD TITLES AVAILABLE AT 2 FOR £30 AT AMAZON.CO.UK*

COMPETITION ENDS 25 AUGUST

HOW TO ENTER Take the letters from each coloured square and rearrange them to form the name of an actor, director or character. Visit www.empireonline.com/crossword and fill out the form, along with your answer, in the provided field. Entry is free and closes at midnight on 25 August. Winners are selected at random. See below for terms and conditions.

ACROSS: **1** Kubrick, **5** *Paths*, **8** Sasha, **9** Deneuve, **10** *Knocked Up*, **13** Ineson, **15** Snyder, **17** Edward Fox, **21** *The Last*, **22** Neary, **23** Ralph, **24** Stevens.
DOWN: **1** *Kiss*, **2** Basinger, **3** Isaac, **4** Kidder, **5** *Penguin*, **6** True, **7** Sue Storm, **11** Director, **12** Advocate, **14** *Of Death*, **16** Mantis, **18** *Dance*, **19** Bell, **20** Eyes.
ANAGRAM: XENOMORPH

TERMS AND CONDITIONS: One entry per person. Entries are free. Entries must be received before 26 August or will not be valid. The Competition is only open to people aged 18 and over who live in the United Kingdom and are not a Bauer employee or their immediate family. Three winners will be selected at random from all valid entries. Competition promoted by H Bauer Publishing t/a Empire ("Empire"). Empire's choice of winners is final, and no correspondence will be entered into in this regard. The winners will be notified, via email, between seven and ten days after the competition ends. Empire will email the winners a maximum of three times. If a winner does not respond to the message within 14 days of the competition's end, Empire will select another winner at random and the original winner will not win a prize. Empire is not responsible for late delivery or unsatisfactory quality of the prize. Entrants agree to the collection of their personal data in accordance with Empire's privacy policy: http://www.bauerdatapromise.co.uk/. Winner's personal details will be given to prize provider to arrange delivery of the prize. Bauer reserves the right to amend or cancel these terms or any aspect of the competition (including the prize) at any time if required for reasons beyond its control. Any questions, please email empire@bauermedia.co.uk. Complaints will not be considered if made more than 30 days after the competition ends. Winner's details available on request (after the competition ends) by emailing empire@bauermedia.co.uk. For full T&Cs see http://www.bauerlegal.co.uk/competition-terms.html

* Offer runs from 14 July–1 September, subject to availability, whilst stocks last

CLASSIC SCENE

A WAY OUT OF HELL

Gandhi

CHOSEN BY **SEAN ASTIN**
(ACTOR)

Sean Astin: "There's a scene in *Gandhi*, where Gandhi's on his fast to try to stop violence. And this man comes in, deranged. He says, 'I killed a boy.' And Gandhi says, 'I know a way out of hell.' That's a pretty great moment. There's so much in there. There's redemption, and the way Gandhi ties redemption to action."

EXT. GANDHI'S RESIDENCE (ROOF) — NIGHT

There is rioting on the streets of Calcutta, and across India as a whole. Violent clashes between Hindus and Muslims are everywhere.

Mahatma Gandhi (Sir Ben Kingsley), who has been on a fast to death in an attempt to bring about peace, is lying on his bed, frail and weakened. We hear a clattering noise off-screen.

Gandhi and Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy (Shekhar Chatterjee) watch as a small group of Goondas stand before Gandhi and, one by one, throw their weapons down on the ground. Their leader speaks.

GOONDA LEADER: It's our promise. We stop. Hindu swords. (*He throws his own down*) It's a promise.

GANDHI: Go. God be with you.

The men turn to leave.

Suddenly, another man rushes past them, eyes wild, startling Suhrawardy and some of Gandhi's team. This is Nahari (Om Puri). He stares at Gandhi, and then takes something out from his tunic and throws it at him. It's a piece of chapati bread.

NAHARI: Here — eat!

Gandhi just looks at him.

NAHARI: Eat! I'm going to hell, but not with your death on my soul!

GANDHI: Only God decides who goes to hell.

NAHARI: I killed a child. I smashed his head against a wall.

GANDHI: Why?

NAHARI: They killed my son. My boy. (*He indicates, with his hand, the height of his son*) The Muslims killed my son!

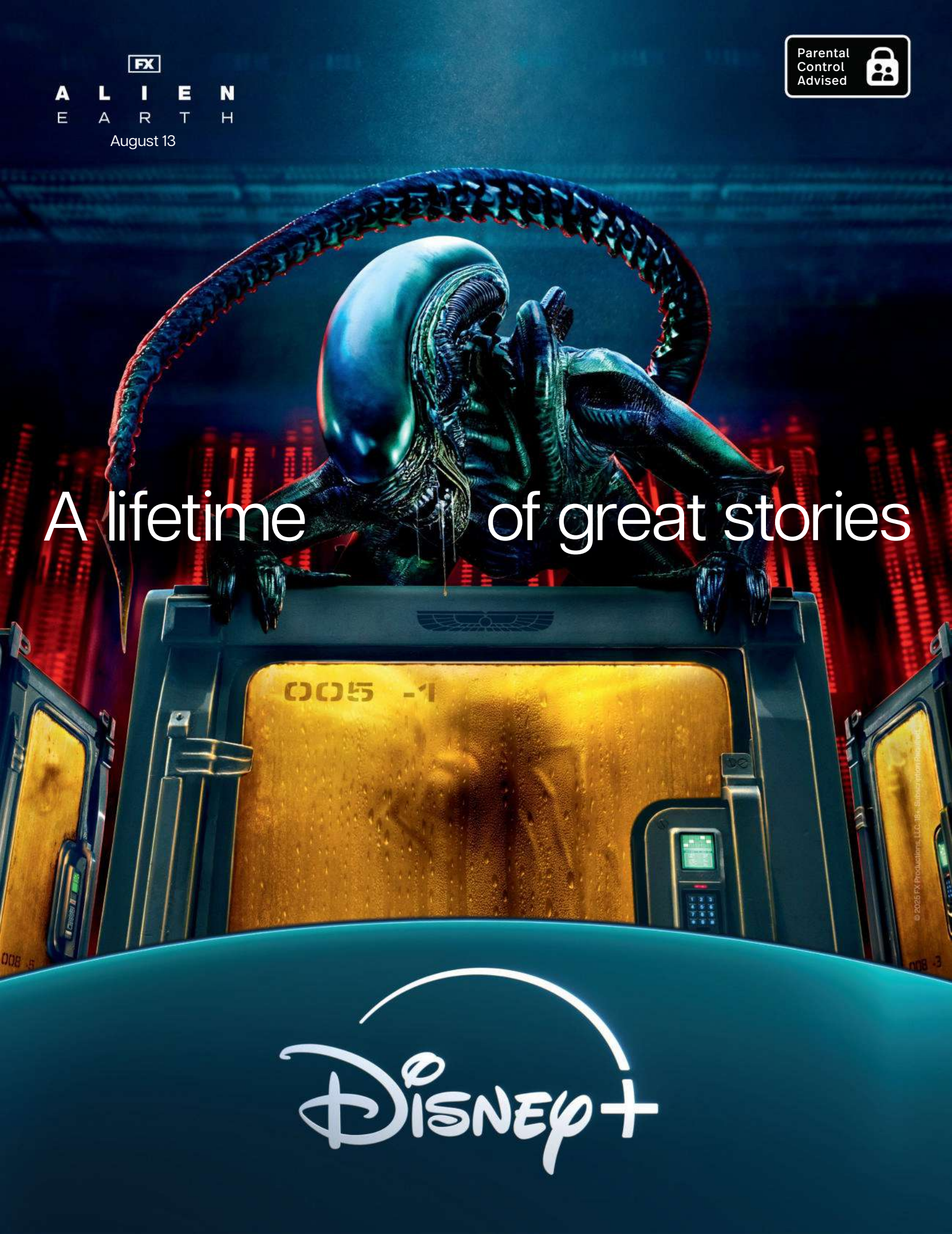
GANDHI: *I know a way out of hell. Find a child. A child whose mother and father have been killed. A little boy, about this high...*

Gandhi lifts his hand a couple of feet off the ground.

GANDHI: And raise him as your own. Only be sure that he is a Muslim, and that you raise him as one.

Nahari stares at Gandhi, unable to speak. Then he steps away from him, turns to face the Goondas, then turns back to Gandhi. He falls to his knees, weeping — overcome with emotion.

GANDHI: Go. Go. God bless you.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